Kingdom of Science Reacts

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Kingdom of Science Reacts

by animika123, orphan_account

Summary

Members of the Kingdom of Science get to watch their future as provided by Ishigami Senkuu.

Featuring some headcannon and non-canonical thoughts to liven up some of the content we've already seen before.

Notes

Hey guys! Before you start the fic here is a few reminders!

Timeline: Group is from pretty close to after they first woke up François, so yes this is BEFORE Treasure Island.
Anything that is in the quote boxes is our flashbacks that we are reacting to.
Cast: Senku, Gen, Ukyou, Ryusui, Taiju, Chrome, Kohaku - Post Chapter 9 We added François and Yuzuriha.

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by The Most Powerful Weapon... by Leefdoor

Chapter 1: Prologue

The ship was built, and things were going well for the Kingdom of Science—almost too well. Their progress had been so rapid that even Senku found it hard to believe. Not that he was complaining. The faster they worked, the better.

Because Tsukasa's freezing wasn't a permanent solution.

The ice would hold for now, but nature wasn't kind to makeshift miracles. Eventually, cracks would form—literally and figuratively. As temperatures fluctuated, as time pressed on, the inevitability of failure loomed over them like a ticking countdown. They had, at most, a year. A year to find the device that had petrified humanity, to understand it, and to use it. The distance they needed to travel to accomplish that? Massive.

But impossible? No. Not at the rate they were moving.

Senku rubbed the back of his neck, grinning to himself before he pushed open the door to the map room on the ship's main deck. Inside, Chrome, Gen, Ukyo, Ryusui, Taiju, and Kohaku were gathered, finalizing their plans.

"Senku-chan! Just the scientist we were looking for~" Gen announced in a sing-song voice, sauntering over. "This box appeared on the table with your name on it. We were *dying* to know what's inside."

Gen was smiling, but Senku caught the tension in his expression. It was subtle—just the slightest tightness around his eyes, the way his usual lazy grin didn't quite reach them. His fingers drummed idly against his arm, a casual motion that felt just a little too controlled. Gen was good at putting on a show, but Senku had known him long enough to recognize when he was uneasy. Whatever conclusion Gen had already reached about the box, he wasn't thrilled about it—and that, more than anything, made Senku's curiosity spike.

A box?

Senku frowned. He could make boxes—paper production had made that possible—but he hadn’t exactly been mass-producing them. And yet, there it was, with his name scrawled across it in his handwriting. He was ten billion percent sure of that.

Which meant something was off.

"Fascinating..." Senku grinned, and Gen rolled his eyes.

"Should’ve guessed you'd say that."

"Senku," Kohaku said warily, hand drifting toward her sword as she eyed the box. "Is it really from you?"

"Ten billion percent," He confirmed, placing his hands on his hips. "But I don’t remember making it."

"Well, only one way to find out!" Ryusui declared, reaching for the box and flipping open the flaps. He pulled out a sheet of white paper. The group leaned in as he read it aloud.

At the bottom was Senku’s signature, complete with a little doodle of himself throwing up a peace sign.

Yo, I invented time travel. Sending you everything. Think of it as Kingdom of Science bonding!
—Senku

Silence. Then, slowly, Senku’s grin widened.

Time travel? Seriously?

It was something he'd look into, eventually. If he was sending this back from the future, then something must have gone wrong—someone must have— No, scratch that. If this was real, then the implications were astronomical. He'd need to account for paradoxes, causality loops, and the sheer energy required to bend the laws of physics. Had he actually solved those problems, or had future him just brute-forced a method with whatever technology they had by then? More importantly—why send this back now? Of all the possible points in time, why here, why this moment? The timing wasn't random, it couldn't be.

"Senku-chan," Gen cut in, voice light but his sharp eyes not smiling. "Time to drop the joke."

"Time travel?! That's so bad!" Chrome practically vibrated with excitement.

"Senku, you really are amazing!" Taiju beamed.

Ukyo, more skeptical, murmured, "But that's… not actually possible, right? Something about paradoxes—if you go back and change something, wouldn't that make it so the reason you created time travel never existed in the first place?"

Senku smirked. "It's theoretically plausible. The principle of causality suggests that if an entity is sent back in time, the version receiving it must ensure its re-transmission in the exact same manner—whether or not they have a reason to."

"That's… a very Senku way of explaining it," Gen muttered.

"Anything else in the box?" Senku prompted.

Ryusui peeked inside, then abruptly pulled back, eyes wide. "It's… a TV."

Chrome practically bounced in place. "One of those moving picture things from your time?!"

Senku stuck a finger in his ear, keeping his expression neutral. "Guess Future Me wants us to watch something. I can get it powered up."

It took only a few minutes to set up. Chrome hovered nearby, eyes full of curiosity as the others watched in nostalgic silence. For those who had lived in the modern era, the sight of a TV was both foreign and familiar—a relic of their lost world. Taiju exhaled softly, his fingers drifting over the edge of the screen as if grounding himself in something long gone.

The screen flickered to life.

10 minutes until playback starts.

Chapter 2: Episode 1 Part 1

10 minutes until playback starts.

"Interesting," Senku grinned, eyes fixed on the screen. "It's programmed to act in a specific way. That means we can reasonably assume it'll continue to give us planned breaks. If this thing shows us exactly where we need to go, even if watching everything takes time, we'll still be ahead of schedule."

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Senku-chan?" Gen asked, hands clasped together beneath the folds of his purple cloak. His tone was light, but there was an unmistakable undercurrent of skepticism.

Senku shrugged. "Right now? I have no clue. But future me is sure. And knowing myself, I wouldn't have done this unless I was ten billion percent certain it would make things better—so—"

"It's Senku, so I know we can trust this!" Taiju interrupted, his wide grin nearly as bright as the screen. His voice boomed with unwavering confidence, just a little louder than necessary.

"We might as well go full steam ahead and get as much information as possible," Ryusui declared, an eager glint in his eye. "Worrying won't change anything. Senku has the right idea—we capitalize on this and use whatever we learn to our advantage!"

Gen exhaled through his nose, shaking his head slightly as his fingers idly traced the edge of his sleeve. There was no stopping this now—not with Senku already locked onto the mystery like a scientist with an unsolved equation, Ryusui practically vibrating with excitement, and Taiju ready to throw himself into whatever came next without a second thought. Resistance was futile. A slow, knowing grin crept onto Gen's face, the kind that said he had long accepted his fate. Whatever was about to happen, it would be entertaining—and if nothing else, Gen had always loved a good show. He folded his arms, shifting his weight onto one foot. Might as well sit back and enjoy the ride.

"On that day, every human was turned to stone."

A ruined city stretched before them, overtaken by nature's relentless reclamation. Crumbling buildings sagged under the weight of time, their skeletal remains barely hinting at the civilization they once housed. The streets, once bustling with life, were now lined with countless stone figures—each one frozen in a final, desperate moment. Their expressions of terror, confusion, and sorrow were etched into the stone with such haunting detail that even the most skilled artisans would struggle to replicate them.

One statue stood out—a woman, arm outstretched, fingers grasping for salvation that would never come. Her desperate reach was frozen in time, a silent plea that would go unanswered for centuries.

"It's strange… They almost look *worse* like this," Kohaku murmured, her voice quieter than usual. "No signs of damage, no wear from time—just... *frozen.* You can see the fear in their faces, like it happened only seconds ago."

"Yeah..." Chrome echoed, his usual energy subdued. He was trying to be respectful—Senku could tell. But behind the solemnity in his voice, that spark of curiosity still burned in his eyes, barely restrained.

The scene shifted, fading into a memory of the past.

A classroom door slammed open, the force of it rattling on its hinges. In the doorway stood a stocky teenager in a school uniform, sweat glistening on his face, his eyes burning with determination. His short, spiky brown hair was slightly disheveled, and his thick eyebrows only made his expression more intense. Even slightly out of breath, his voice boomed with its usual volume, unwavering and full of conviction.

"Listen up, Senku!"

"It's me!" Taiju blurted out, almost as if shocked by his own presence on the screen.

"Of course it is, you big oaf," Senku deadpanned, absently digging his pinky into his ear, still trying to dislodge the stubborn bit of stone. Still itching like a son of a bitch.

Gen tilted his head, a thoughtful smirk playing at his lips. "More importantly, what an interesting angle for this little documentary. I wonder how future Senku-chan managed to

pull this off~"

Senku's mind churned for a moment, assessing the logistics. If Future Him had somehow compiled multiple perspectives of the same event, that meant pulling visual and cognitive data from different sources—possibly even reconstructing memory imprints. But the computational power required for that would be…

Something to think about later. He focused back on the screen. After all, he'd need to recreate it himself sooner or later.

"So this is what it looked like before everything turned to stone…" Chrome breathed, eyes practically sparkling with wonder.

Kohaku crossed her arms, observing the screen with a frown. "It's strange. It looks so alive, but at the same time, kind of… fragile."

Senku glanced at Chrome's awestruck expression and smirked. The guy was practically vibrating with excitement, his eyes wide as he drank in every detail of the world that once was. Skyscrapers, cars, neon lights—things Senku had long since taken for granted—were nothing short of magic to someone like Chrome.

Chrome, you really were born in the wrong time.

In another life, in another era, he would have been an engineer, a physicist, maybe even a scientist rivaling Senku himself. The way he craved knowledge, the way he pieced things together with nothing but observation and instinct—it was wasted on the Stone World. But at the same time, maybe that was exactly why he thrived. In a place where science had been erased, Chrome had rediscovered it all on his own. Senku's smirk deepened. It didn't matter what time period Chrome was born in—he would have found a way to break the limits of his world either way.

Taiju shouted passionately, stepping into the room.

His voice boomed with unshakable determination, instantly drawing the attention of his classmates. Shocked expressions flickered across their faces as they turned to stare—all but one. The teenager with wild green hair didn't so much as glance up. Senku remained laser-focused on the project in front of him, hands steady, mind already five steps ahead. His lab coat collar was turned up, a habit he'd picked up while studying Ebola in Africa—though his colleagues had always found it a little disrespectful. Not that he cared.

"—I have made up my mind! Today, I will confess these feelings I've had for the past five years to Yuzuriha!"

"Go for what you desire! Admirable, Taiju!" Ryusui declared with a booming laugh, his whole body shaking with enthusiasm.

Taiju—usually shameless—actually looked a little flustered at his own bold declaration.

Not that any of us didn't already know, Senku mused, exchanging a knowing grin with Gen, who returned it with an even wider one. Anyone with *half* a millimeter of observational skills could see what was between those two—whether in the Stone World *or* the world before.

The sudden exclamation startled nearly every student in the room. A chorus of groans and complaints filled the air as several covered their ears against the noise, the initial shock of Taiju's entrance reigniting all over again.

Only one person remained unfazed. In the middle of the room, the lanky, green-haired boy didn't so much as flinch. He moved only when he chose to, turning his head slowly toward his friend, his expression unreadable. A single lock of hair—one of the few that obeyed gravity—fell in front of his face as he regarded the brown-haired boy with detached curiosity.

Then, in a flat, dispassionate tone, he finally spoke.

"Yeah? Well, that sure does sound interesting..."

"Doesn't sound like you're interested at all, Senku-chan," Gen noted with a snicker, eyes glinting with mischief. "Though, I must say, you look a lot softer with that hairstyle."

"Softer?" Senku echoed, raising a brow. "Should I take that as a compliment, Mentalist?"

"Naturally! Would I ever insult you?" Gen asked, placing a hand over his heart in mock sincerity.

"Yes."

"Ah! You wound me, Senku-chan!" Gen clutched his chest dramatically, swaying as if he might keel over from the sheer injustice.

> The boy's face was just as sharp as his tone—distinctive red eyes utterly untroubled. "I'll be cheering for you so hard my vocal cords will snap. From right here in this science lab."
>
> Without missing a beat, he clicked the vial into place on the complicated-looking machine in front of him, his focus never wavering.
>
> *Don't misunderstand my sarcasm, you earnest oaf...*

"Heh..." Senku exhaled sharply, wincing at the revelation. *That* wasn't something he had foreseen. It *should* have been. To create something like this, they would have needed to extract data directly from multiple people's brains—so it stood to reason that thoughts would be included. Still, knowing it in theory was one thing. *Experiencing* it was another.

"We can decide not to watch, Senku-chan," Gen offered lightly, though his eyes gleamed with intrigue.

"Did we just hear his thoughts?" Chrome muttered to himself, eyes wide with dawning realization.

Senku exhaled through his nose, shaking his head almost ruefully. "If I could have done it without including thoughts, I probably would have."

"OH, YOU WILL?!" The brown-haired teenager practically launched himself toward the scientist, bounding over with uncontainable enthusiasm. He skidded to a stop beside him, fists clenched, eyes shining. "Thank you, Senku!"

Why am I not surprised?

Senku winced, sticking a finger in his ear to clear out the lingering echo of Taiju's shouting. His expression was pure annoyance, but his red eyes held something quieter beneath it—buried deep, where no one would notice unless they knew what to look for, "Be quiet. I won't be cheering for you even one millimeter, you big oaf."

"Your eyes are looking a little soft there, Senku-chan," Gen murmured, his voice laced with quiet amusement.

Senku scoffed, rolling his eyes as he waved a dismissive hand. "Yeah, yeah, Mentalist."

"WHAT?!" Taiju yelled, looking thoroughly put out. "Which is it!?"

Senku only smirked, crossing his arms. "Anyway, five years, and you still haven't said anything? Idiot. How illogical can you be?"

He wasn't some expert on emotions, but even *he* could see it. Maybe Taiju just needed a little extra push.

Ryusui let out a booming laugh. "Playing matchmaker now? I didn't know our illustrious leader was so multi-talented!"

Ukyo smirked, shaking his head in quiet amusement.

Taiju swallowed, hesitating for just a moment. "Senku... Do you really think—"

"Jeez, you big oaf," Senku deadpanned, eyes flat with disinterest.

"Seennnnkkkkuuuuuuu~!"

Senku crouched slightly, rummaging through his desk before pulling something out. "I'll give you something so logical, it's to die for." A devilish grin spread across his face as he held up a flask containing a transparent liquid with a faint yellow tinge. His voice carried the same mischievous edge as his expression, "A drug that will stimulate your pheromone output to the maximum. In words you'll understand—*a love potion.*"

"That exists?!" Chrome exclaimed, eyes sparkling with scientific curiosity—though, unlike back in that long-ago classroom, his interest had nothing to do with romance.

Kohaku promptly smacked him upside the head. "Don't be weird, Chrome!"

"I wasn't! Jesus, lioness—"

"Don't call me that!" Kohaku snapped, immediately locking him into a noogie, grinding her knuckles into his scalp with relentless force. Chrome yelped, thrashing in protest, but she didn’t let up—not even as he begged for mercy.

Senku shot him a sideways glance, his grin unwavering as he locked eyes with his friend. Holding the beaker out deliberately, he let the moment stretch just long enough to build anticipation, "Once you drink this, you’ll win her over with ten billion percent certainty!"

"You're weird for even *creating* that!" Kohaku snapped, suddenly turning on Senku.

He barely had time to react before she started toward him, eyes sharp with suspicion. Raising his hands in defense, he took a step back, "Wait, wait! It's not what it looks like, you brute. Just watch for a second!" Senku exclaimed, his tone just a *little* more frantic than usual.

It almost looked like Taiju was considering it for a moment—then, with a calm flick of his wrist, he turned the beaker over above the sink, pouring the yellow liquid down the drain. The action left many of their fellow students staring in shock.

"Good on you, Taiju! That's how you really win a girl over!" Kohaku loudly exclaimed.

Knew it, Senku resisted the urge to grin at the oaf.

"Fine! You're lucky your *thoughts* saved you from a beating," Kohaku huffed, crossing her arms before flexing one with a teasing grin.

"Loyalty is fleeting, huh, Senku-chan?" Gen chimed in, smirking as he watched the exchange unfold.

"Thank you, Senku! But sorry, I can't rely on your science this time!" Taiju declared, looking straight at the scientist with unwavering determination.

Then, without hesitation, he turned and strode out of the room, his steps firm, his purpose clear. The door slammed shut behind him. For a moment, there was silence. Then, as if on cue, every head in the room swiveled toward Senku.

"Seriously, Senku? A love potion?"

A few students glanced toward the sink where the liquid had been poured, their expressions filled with obvious longing. Senku resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. *Seriously?* Even after watching Taiju dump it without hesitation, they still looked like they were mourning a lost opportunity. It was almost impressive—just not in a way that made him proud of humanity. He cast a flat, unimpressed look at them, as if silently questioning how they managed to survive this long with brains that prioritized *that* over basic logic.

Senku sighed, unimpressed. "Like those even exist."

With a flick of his fingers, he tossed a burning match into the sink. The remaining liquid ignited instantly, flames flaring up in a brief but dramatic display—one final, undeniable proof that it had never been what they thought it was.

"This is probably a weird question, but..." Chrome paused, frowning as he tried to find the right words. "You all seem to be the same age here, but Senku is *so* much better than the rest of them."

Senku glanced away, not particularly eager to answer. *There wasn't exactly a polite way to put it…*

Gen, ever perceptive, caught the shift in Senku's demeanor and smoothly stepped in. "Senku-chan is the kind of once-in-a-very-rare-lifetime genius. Statistically speaking, thousands like him should be born across the planet, but not everyone gets the right conditions to develop that kind of intelligence. And even among those who do, not all of them choose to go into the hard sciences like Senku did." He turned toward Chrome with a knowing smirk. "Honestly, if *you* had been born back then..."

Senku didn't need to hear the rest.

Yeah, he inwardly agreed. *Chrome could have been amazing. He still can. But… so much time was lost.*

"It's just gasoline refined from plastic bottle caps," Senku explained calmly. It was going to be his first professional research paper, after all. More sustainable fuel sources were essential to study and develop—not exactly a new concept, but refining the *process* to make it more efficient? That was where real progress happened. The machine on the desk was only Mark 1, but already, it was precisely 0.0027% more efficient than the current industry standard. Not much, but science *was* a game of inches.

Better to give these guys some kind of explanation…

"The patented Senku explanation we all know and love," Kohaku said with a grin, already bracing herself to understand absolutely none of it—just as usual.

The other students murmured in confusion, their questioning noises filling the room.

Senku smirked, more than happy to enlighten them. "Think about the molecular structure of polyethylene, morons. It's just a long gasoline molecule with a few hydrocarbons chopped off."

"So this is when you did it. The petrification must be happening soon, then," Ryusui mused, lightly touching his chin. Senku had mentioned recently that the last bit of science he worked on before everything went dark was refining gasoline—so it wasn't too surprising that the greedy man remembered.

"It'll be fascinating to see it again," Senku said with a grin. "I do have perfect recall, but..."

He trailed off, eyes glinting with curiosity. Likely, they'd be seeing it from different perspectives this time. And who knew—there might be *new* facts to uncover in the process.

"You can tell just by looking at it."

Silence.

"Uh, no, we can't."

"No way. You freak of nature."

Senku just shrugged, unfazed. Was that supposed to be an insult, or a compliment? Hard to tell—not that it mattered.

"You really *are* kind of a freak, Senku-chan," Gen admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

Senku smirked, shooting him a sideways glance. "Like I want to hear that from *you.* As if you're any different."

Speaking of geniuses who don't focus on hard science… Senku mused to himself. Normally, he wouldn't bother saying it out loud—but with their thoughts being broadcast to everyone, it hardly mattered anyway.

A boy with glasses spoke up hesitantly, "Wait... does that mean if he drank it, Taiju would have *died*?"

"Do you feel any particular way about that, Taiju-kun?" Gen asked, genuine curiosity lacing his tone.

Senku's gaze softened as he watched the big oaf, a rare flicker of something unspoken crossing his expression. Taiju was predictable in the best way—stubbornly loyal, unwavering in his trust. There was never a doubt in his mind, never a moment of hesitation when it came to believing in Senku. Senku already knew the answer. He always did. But seeing it so clearly reflected in Taiju's eyes, full of absolute certainty, still struck something deep within him.

"Huh?! No way! Senku wouldn't have done it if he thought I'd actually get hurt," Taiju exclaimed, unwavering trust shining in his eyes.

These two... Gen mused to himself, shaking his head fondly.

> Senku turned to respond with a relaxed grin and another shrug. "I was ten billion percent sure he wouldn't drink it. That straight-laced idiot? He would *never*."
>
> The scenery changed to sunlight filtered through the tree leaves, casting dappled shadows on the ground below. Beneath a fractured branch stood a lithe teenage girl, her long brown hair cascading down her back, matching the warmth of her expressive brown eyes. Dressed in a school uniform, she wore a yellow vest over her blouse, a red ribbon neatly tied in a bow at her collar. A distinctive white hairband, resembling headphones, held her hair in place. After a brief moment of thought, she reached up and carefully removed her ribbon. With practiced movements, she began tying it around the damaged branch, her fingers working with quiet precision. The fabric fluttered slightly in the breeze, a small but deliberate act in a world that would soon change forever.

"She really *is* beautiful!" Ryusui declared with a wide grin.

Saying that right after Taiju just announced his confession… and knowing he's still interested? Gen mused, resisting the urge to sigh. *Emotional irrationality is already messy, but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, it gets out of hand fast.* Hopefully, this wouldn't turn into a problem.

"I know, right?!" Taiju agreed enthusiastically, completely unbothered.

Ryusui and Taiju both burst into laughter, their voices booming across the deck, unrestrained and full of energy. It was the kind of laughter that could shake the tension out of a room, a contagious force of nature that made it impossible not to at least crack a smile. Their shared enthusiasm fed off each other, rising in volume as if they were in competition to see who could be louder. They really were similar in that way—loud, passionate, and utterly unfazed by things that would make most people hesitate. Where others might second-guess or overthink, they charged forward without hesitation, fully believing in themselves and their desires. It wasn't just confidence—it was *conviction,* the kind that made them larger than life, completely unshaken by things that would give anyone else pause.

Taiju-kun consistently exceeds expectations… Gen thought to himself, shaking his head in amusement.

Senku caught the Mentalist's expression out of the corner of his eye and smirked. They all still underestimated just how *out of this world* Taiju really was.

"Yuzuriha!"

Taiju stepped into the school's courtyard, his voice strong, filled with determination.

The girl turned at the sound of her name, offering him a small, shy smile. "Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Taiju swallowed hard.

"So, what did you want to talk about, Taiju?" Yuzuriha asked, her tone gentle, affectionate even. She took a couple of steps toward him, the sunlight catching her face as she squinted slightly against the brightness.

She smiled at him—soft, warm, *beautiful.*

Taiju gulped, trying to wet his suddenly dry throat.

From an open window above the courtyard, three teenage boys leaned over the edge, watching the unfolding scene with undisguised amusement.

"A hundred yen says he gets rejected," one of them muttered.

"Three hundred yen says he gets rejected *hard,*" another chimed in.

"Five hundred yen says he gets rejected at *full power!*"

They snickered, already anticipating the moment. But then, to their shock, another voice joined in from behind them—one that never engaged in such trivial bets.

"Ten thousand yen says he unexpectedly *doesn't* get rejected."

The trio turned in unison, eyes wide. (Around 65 dollars.)

"Since when do high school kids have that much money just lying around?" Ukyo mused, glancing toward Senku.

"Ehhh..." Senku muttered, briefly considering how to explain. Might as well be straightforward. "For one, I *knew* I wasn't going to lose, so even if I didn't have the money, it wouldn't have mattered. Two, I had just come back from a research project in Africa studying Ebola and still had residuals from my research stipend coming in."

Silence.

Every eye in the room turned toward Senku in evident shock.

"So you were *already* working as a scientist when this all happened..." Ukyo said, his voice tinged with realization.

It shouldn't be as surprising as it is, Gen thought, folding his arms and tapping a finger idly against his sleeve. Senku handled everything with a level of maturity that went beyond just being a genius—it took *experience*. The kind that didn't come from textbooks alone but from actual hands-on work, from dealing with real-world crises, from carrying responsibilities most teenagers couldn't even fathom. *Same for Tsukasa-kun…* The realization settled uncomfortably in his mind. Both of them, in their own ways, had been forced to grow up faster than the people around them—Senku through science, Tsukasa through survival.

Gen sighed inwardly, a little disappointed in himself for not connecting the dots sooner. He prided himself on reading people, on catching the details others missed, yet Senku still managed to slip past his mental filters like a puzzle with missing pieces. He shouldn't be *this* surprised—yet here he was, blindsided again. Senku really had a knack for that.

Before anyone could comment further, a loud *sniffle* cut through the moment.

"Senkuuuu!"

Taiju, now openly crying, lunged forward. Senku, anticipating the outburst *ten billion percent,* had already planted a foot in front of him, stopping the oaf before impact.

"Thank you for your faith in me, Senku!" Taiju wailed, undeterred by the fact that he had been physically blocked.

Senku rolled his eyes and turned back to the screen, not wanting to miss a second. He knew what was coming next.

Senku leaned with his back against the window beside theirs, the picture of casual confidence. He smirked as he calmly cracked open an energy drink, the sharp *hiss* of carbonation filling the air. Lifting the can to his lips, he watched his friend out of the corner of his eye.

After all, I am ten billion percent sure that she—

"SERIOUSLY?!"

The group of betters erupted in disbelief, their voices a mix of shock and frustration at the sheer confidence in his words.

I was afraid that by telling her how I feel, Yuzuriha wouldn't even be my precious friend anymore…

Taiju's gaze dropped, uncertainty clouding his expression. His mouth closed, shoulders tense. *I've been a coward all this time…* But then, he looked up. Determination surged through him, pushing past the fear that had kept him frozen for years. He stepped forward, his voice unwavering.

"Hear me out, Yuzuriha!"

Yuzuriha flinched slightly at the sudden intensity of his words, her eyes widening.

...But today is the day...

She blinked, a blush dusting her cheeks as Taiju closed the distance between them.

"For the past five years, I have…"

Senku, mid-sip of his drink, suddenly startled. Lowering the can slightly, his gaze flicked toward the horizon.

A rapid luminescence—green, unnatural—rippled across the sky.

His brain shifted gears instantly. *Waveform propagation… Based on S=D/T… The distance between the two buildings… 2 meters… Velocity of—*

"That... is impressive, Senku," Gen murmured, feeling an involuntary tremor in his hand. It was that rare, exhilarating feeling—the kind that hit when he truly grasped the *scale* of something. A man who had counted every second for years. A mind that could shift from idle banter to high-speed calculation in an instant. And now, watching Senku's brain kick into immediate action, Gen felt it again. His gaze lingered too long, drawn in by the sheer *impossibility* of it. He realized it a second too late and quickly turned his attention back to the screen, schooling his expression into something more casual.

Senku, however, had already noticed. He tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing as he regarded Gen with quiet consideration.

Taiju hadn't moved, but his gaze had shifted—no longer focused on Yuzuriha, but staring past her, unblinking.

Intense green luminescence washed over the city, casting an eerie, otherworldly glow across every surface. The light stretched from beyond the horizon, its source unseen, yet its presence undeniable. In an instant... everything *stopped.* Conversations died mid-sentence. Footsteps faltered. On the school track field, a group of girls froze, their cooldown routines forgotten as they lifted their eyes skyward, bathed in the unnatural radiance. In Shibuya, the pulse of the city came to an abrupt halt. Pedestrians in the crowded crosswalk—businessmen, students, tourists—stood motionless, eyes wide in stunned confusion. A few middle schoolers raised their phones, capturing what they would never get the chance to explain.

Then, the surge came.

A massive, blinding column of green light erupted, stretching impossibly high, swallowing everything in its path. It wasn't just a glow—it was *something more,*

something almost tangible in its sheer, overwhelming intensity.

From the vast expanse of space, the green energy cascaded downward, sweeping across the Earth in an unrelenting wave.

Senku couldn't help but start muttering under his breath as he watched the phenomenon unfold. The math in his mind ran wild, calculations stacking upon calculations, his brain processing at a breakneck pace. His eyes didn't stray from the screen—not for a single second. His expression darkened, but his grin remained, sharp with exhilaration.

"We're up against something crazy…" he murmured, almost to himself. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Senku?" Chrome ventured hesitantly.

"The velocity exhibited is exceptional. The energy driving such a widespread propagation over terrestrial expanses must have an origin. What conceivable source could account for this energy output?" Senku pondered aloud, his voice distant, detached. He barely registered the question directed at him—he *couldn't.* He was too locked in.

Gen, watching from the side, exhaled softly, resisting the urge to meet Senku's gaze. "Give him a minute or two, Chrome. I don't think he can hear us right now."

An eerie gust swept through the school grounds, rustling the trees with an unnatural chill. Yuzuriha gasped, her fingers tightening around the rough bark of the nearby camphor tree. Her eyes widened in shock as she stared toward the distant horizon, where the impossible glow surged closer.

Suddenly, Taiju sprinted past her.

"Yuzuriha! Hold onto the camphor tree!"

Without hesitation, he planted himself in front of her, arms outstretched as though his sheer will alone could shield her from whatever was coming.

"I'm not sure what's happening, but—!"

The wave struck.

A brilliant flash of green engulfed him, swallowing everything in its path. Taiju's face remained unchanged—unshaken, unwavering. His eyes blazed with determination, his body locked in defiance against the unknown.

Then, in an instant, he was stone.

"Even in a moment like that, Taiju really is something else," Ukyo admitted, his voice tinged with quiet respect.

"It pains me to admit it, but I think most of us just… *stared* at it," Ryusui said, shaking his head. "The way he kicked into action without a second thought? *Admirable!*" With a confident snap of his fingers, he grinned. "That's exactly why you'll be part of my crew!"

Within the school, the luminous wave seeped through the walls, its eerie green glow swallowing everything in its path. The once-bustling corridors fell silent, lined with stone figures—students and teachers frozen mid-movement, their everyday attire now eerily preserved in petrified stillness.

Yet, inside their minds, chaos raged.

"What's going on? It's so dark..."

"I can't move."

"I can't speak… Someone… help me!"

Beyond the school, an entire city bathed in green luminescence. Towering skyscrapers loomed over streets filled with unmoving figures—men, women, children—all turned to stone, their last moments preserved in silent horror.

And then, new voices emerged. Distant, foreign.

"Help… HELP!!"

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?!"

"Is this… a cerebral infarct?"

"It's..." Ukyo muttered, his voice trailing off as he looked away, unable to finish the thought.

"We *know,* of course, that it must have affected the whole Earth," Gen admitted, his usual light tone subdued. "But actually *seeing* it..."

The words hung heavy between them. It was one thing to understand the scope intellectually, but another entirely to witness the exact moment civilization fell. All that progress—centuries of human achievement—erased in an instant. For Senku, it had to be even worse. Everything he had ever worked with, every foundation of science he had relied on, was gone. At least the *soft sciences* that Gen preferred—psychology, manipulation, human nature—would always remain relevant. But Senku? He needed to rebuild *everything* before he could even begin.

They weren't just watching history.

They were watching the fall of all humanity.

> The Forbidden City in China was bathed in an eerie, radiant glow. Tourists and locals alike turned skyward, their awe quickly shifting to fear—before they, too, became unmoving statues.
>
> *"这是瘫痪吗？"* (*Is this paralysis?*)
>
> *"有人…请救护车…"* (*Someone… call an ambulance…*)

> Across the world, the green light swallowed the Colosseum in Rome. Within its ancient ruins, a couple clung to each other in their final moments, fingers intertwined, their faces frozen in terror—yet still together.
>
> *"Amore mio, prenditi cura dei bambini…"* (*My love, take care of the children…*)

"So many different words that we can't understand…" Kohaku murmured, her brows furrowing as she listened to the voices, now nothing more than echoes of the past.

"It's painful to admit," Gen said, his usual playful tone absent, "but many languages will now be completely lost." He exhaled softly, folding his arms. "There were already languages that had no living speakers—only studied, preserved in books. And now, even *those* records are gone."

No matter how quickly they worked to bring civilization back, some things were lost forever. Centuries of effort—countless scholars, historians, and speakers who had fought to keep their cultures alive—erased in an instant. It was heartbreaking. For those who had tried so hard to preserve knowledge, to keep their history from fading…

This was their worst nightmare come true.

> The frantic inner voices, in countless languages, swelled into a deafening roar—a chaotic symphony of confusion, fear, and desperation. The clamor crescendoed, building to an unbearable peak—
>
> And then, silence.
>
> A piercing alarm wailed through the stillness, the only sound left in an abandoned world.
>
> The streets were in ruins. Vehicles lay scattered across the road, crumpled and piled atop one another as if tossed by an unseen force. Not a single car had escaped the chaos—several were overturned, their shattered windshields reflecting the eerie green glow that still lingered in the air. Wisps of smoke curled skyward from a few of them, the only movement in an otherwise frozen scene. Near the wreckage of a truck and a blue car, the stone figure of a businessman stood trapped, his petrified body wedged between metal and asphalt, frozen mid-motion. Inside the car, two more figures—passengers who had never seen it coming—sat unmoving, their final moments preserved in cold, unyielding stone.
>
> The world had stopped.

"The loss is…" Kohaku exhaled, her voice quieter than usual as she watched the wreckage—the once-modern cars, now little more than twisted metal, smashed together in an instant of frozen catastrophe.

Chrome was silent for a moment before speaking. "Any of them that broke this soon..."

"They're definitely gone," Senku stated, his tone matter-of-fact. "Probably already eroded into the Earth completely. No coming back from that, no matter how much revival fluid we make."

Taiju lowered his head. "May they rest in peace."

Gen studied the two of them thoughtfully, his lips quirking in quiet amusement.

I wonder how many times Senku has said something completely disrespectful, and Taiju just smoothed it over…

It was an oddly perfect balance—the sharp-edged scientist who saw everything through logic and data, and the earnest fool who carried enough warmth for the both of them. Taiju never hesitated to offer respect where Senku refused to see the need for it, bridging the gap between cold calculation and human sentiment.

It's almost instinctual at this point, Gen mused, tapping a finger against his chin. *Senku drops one of his detached, brutally rational comments, and before anyone can take offense, Taiju swoops in with some heartfelt words like a walking, talking buffer zone.*

Gen chuckled under his breath.

I wonder if Senku even realizes how much easier Taiju makes his life… or if Taiju realizes he's been doing it all along.

> An airplane descended over a city filled with towering skyscrapers, its engines roaring as it hurtled toward disaster. Inside the cockpit, the pilots sat motionless—transformed into stone, their hands still gripping the controls, eyes frozen in a final, helpless moment.

At the flight control center, rows of personnel stood petrified, poised as if they might spring into action at any second. But they couldn’t. The world had already left them behind.

Without guidance, without intervention, the plane crashed. The impact sent a shockwave through the city, erupting into a fiery explosion that consumed buildings, streets, and everything in its path. From miles away, the inferno could be seen, a towering beacon of destruction against the darkened sky. Among the raging flames, a stone face tumbled downward, a haunting expression of terror carved into its features.

Nearby, amidst the smoke and debris, a puppy tugged desperately at its leash, yapping and scrabbling against the leg of a petrified girl. It whined, jumping in frantic bursts, but the stone hand gripping the leash did not move. Could not move.

Raindrops began to fall, sizzling as they met the blaze, streaming down the unmoving face of the teenage girl. A single droplet pooled briefly in the corner of her stone eye, creating the illusion of a tear.

A faint voice, distant and young, echoed from within her mind.

"Please help... Mom... Dad..."

The rain fell harder. Her petrified hand remained clenched around the leash, locking the small creature in place as it barked in vain, desperate for someone—*anyone*—to answer. Her thoughts, too, were fading now, slipping into silence.

"Is this… how… I end…?"

And then, nothing.

30 minutes before playback resumes.

"Looks like it's break time. Senku-chan has *good* dramatic timing," Gen mused, his voice laced with twisted humor.

"We should use this time to prepare," Senku said, stretching his arms. "We're going to be here a while… might as well get some seating set up. And for the *full* twisted experience, we should probably get some snacks."

"I'll speak with Francois about that!" Ryusui volunteered, perhaps a little *too* eagerly.

"Gen will handle the seating," Senku added without missing a beat.

Gen’s eye twitched slightly, but he kept his usual easygoing smile. *That's our leader for you.*

"Kohaku and I will help him?" Ukyo offered, though it was more of a suggestion than a statement. He glanced at Kohaku, who gave a curt nod of agreement. Without another word, the three set off.

Senku lingered for a moment, glancing at the TV before shaking his head. *Thirty minutes.* Enough time to squeeze in some science before the documentary resumed. Without another word, he walked off—no sense in wasting even a second.

Chapter 3: Episode 1 Part 2

The room was now scattered with makeshift seating, padded with animal pelts and stuffed with feathers. As always, they took a moment to admire their handiwork with quiet satisfaction. At the center of it all, Ryusui had somehow managed to provide finger food that looked *far* too high-quality for the situation—laid out on the table with almost ridiculous elegance. As the countdown ticked toward zero, the preparations were complete.

"This is really starting to feel like a movie night," Gen remarked, gesturing toward the TV and the spread of snacks. "It'll be Chrome and Kohaku's first time, too~."

"Yeah, yeah, let's just take our seats, *Mentalist*," Senku muttered, already lowering himself into a chair. He sprawled across it without a care, eyes trained on the screen, as if willing it to resume faster.

"Such *lack* of ceremony from our illustrious leader. I suppose we shall follow suit, then," Gen snickered, but without hesitation, he took the seat directly beside Senku.

Before anyone could say another word, the TV flickered back to life on its own.

WHOOOOOOAAHH!

Taiju's mind *roared* as lightning cracked above him, a brilliant flash cutting through the abyss.

His stone form remained unmoved, frozen in the exact spot where he had fallen all those years ago. His school uniform was soaked through, rain streaming down his petrified face, trickling between cracks like tears.

But inside, his consciousness burned.

I AM NOT DEAD YET!

The thought thundered through his mind, desperate and defiant.

If I let my guard down even a little, I'll be sucked in…

Wake up, me!

Yuzuriha—he had to believe in her. *She's all right. She has to be safe!*

No matter how much time had passed—he couldn't give up now.

"Is that how it works?! You have to stay awake the *whole* time?!" Chrome cried in horror, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Nope!" Gen admitted, shaking his head with a tired chuckle. He shot a sideways glance at Senku, something unreadable flickering behind his eyes. "Only the *monstrous* could pull off something like that."

Senku didn't react, but of course, he *never* reacted to things like that. Gen sighed, his usual dramatic flair softening. "The rest of us… Some stayed awake longer than others, but eventually, it was like going to sleep. No passage of time, no awareness. Just nothing—until we woke up, feeling refreshed, like no time had passed at all."

Chrome visibly sagged in relief. "Oh, *that* makes way more sense!"

Gen hummed in agreement, but his gaze flicked back to Senku for just a moment longer than necessary. *How do you even begin to process someone like that?*

A sunlit image—Yuzuriha, waiting beneath the camphor tree, her silhouette framed by golden light.

I won't let myself die a coward. This time… I will tell Yuzuriha!

Time surged forward in an instant.

The warmth of daylight was gone. In its place, a burly, unkempt dog stood in the darkness, lips curled back in a vicious snarl. Its fangs gleamed under the faint glow of the moon as it growled into the night, poised on the edge of instinct and hunger.

"I think I could take him," Kohaku mused, studying the beast with a grin. Her fingers traced the hilt of her sword, her stance shifting ever so slightly—already prepared, already *anticipating* the fight.

Atop a grassy knoll, silhouetted against the skeletal remains of concrete structures and leaning utility poles, three wolves raised their heads to the glowing moon, their howls weaving into the silence of a reclaimed world.

In a cramped alleyway, sewer grates erupted like geysers, their long-neglected systems overwhelmed by centuries of rain and ruin. The buildings loomed in quiet decay, their facades consumed by ivy and moss, roots snaking through shattered windows and collapsed doorways. The clothing of the petrified remained in tatters, time having worn away the last remnants of human civilization. One statue leaned precariously against a crumbling wall, another lay in pieces—their fragile, frozen forms unable to withstand the centuries.

Nature had begun its slow conquest of the urban sprawl. Trees and vines sprawled across once-busy streets, thick vegetation consuming everything in its path. Even rooftops had not been spared, their surfaces blanketed in green. Vehicles, long abandoned, had become part of the landscape—trapped beneath gnarled roots and creeping foliage. A rusted bus lay half-buried, its frame twisted, overtaken by the ceaseless march of time.

I am going to survive…

Somewhere beneath the wreckage of years past, Taiju's stone form lay unmoving, lost to time.

A great surge of water crashed over him, rushing through the ruins, washing away debris, flooding the cracks of a world long abandoned.

By willpower alone if I have to!

His mind roared with conviction.

Even if the world had fallen, even if nature had buried the past—*he would endure.*

"No way..." Gen finally murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. He could *see* where this was going—could *feel* the realization settling in—but even for him, it was almost too ridiculous to believe.

Senku could feel the grin creeping onto his face. It was time for the Kingdom of Science to finally grasp just how *utterly* beyond reason their stamina monster really was. Neither of the other two had caught on yet—but they would. Oh, they *would.*

A snicker escaped before he could stop it.

No matter if it's for weeks or for months…

The world continued to crumble, shifting and eroding as *centuries* passed.

I will say it… for sure… no matter what!

Beside a vast, still lake, encircled by thick woodland, time had left its mark. Corroded vehicles lay half-submerged along the shores, their rusted frames barely distinguishable from the skeletal remains of collapsed structures. The remnants of furniture, scattered and weather-worn, mingled with the jagged forms of petrified statues—silent witnesses to an era long forgotten.

Beyond the trees, the ruins of once-modern buildings loomed, their steel and concrete skeletons swallowed by relentless vegetation. Vines coiled around cracked walls, roots split through shattered pavement, nature steadily reclaiming what had once been humanity's domain.

Among it all, Taiju's stone form remained, resting horizontally on the forest floor. Towering trees had grown around him, their trunks stretching skyward, their roots entwined with his immobile body. Moss and ivy climbed across his torso, winding over his arms and shoulders as if nature itself had tried to pull him into its embrace.

How many decades has it been now?

How many centuries…?

"T-Taiju…" Ukyo managed to utter, his voice barely above a whisper, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Ahahaha! *Of course* he would manage to stay awake on pure determination to confess to his love!" Ryusui exclaimed, forcing a laugh, his usual bravado pushing against the sheer absurdity of what he'd just learned. "That is some truly *powerful* motivation!"

But it *wasn't* normal, and no amount of charm or bravado could make it make sense. He tried, but there was a tremble in his voice that refused to be masked.

Both of those two… That explains a lot. Gen exhaled, tilting his head toward the sky as if it held the answer to how Taiju and Senku had endured what no one else could. *How had neither of them been driven to complete insanity? Or… maybe they had? Once this is over, they need to be evaluated. Not that we even have a frame of reference on how to help them…*

"What?" Taiju asked, blinking in confusion as he looked around at everyone's expressions.

"They're amazed by what a *dunderhead* you are, staying awake all those years just so you could confess to *some girl~!*" Senku teased, his usual smirk creeping back onto his face.

It was a rare thing lately. Senku hadn't even noticed when he'd stopped teasing Taiju like this, but the moment the words left his mouth, he felt it—a weight he hadn't realized he was carrying *finally* lifting, even if just a little. *Damn… I've definitely been pushing myself too hard, huh?*

"You'll understand one day, Senku!" Taiju grinned, completely unbothered, his optimism as steadfast as ever.

Senku scoffed, waving him off with an exaggerated groan before looking away. "Naaah, man, you sound like Byakuya right now."

Taiju just *laughed.* It wasn't quite as contagious as usual. The others were still too haunted by what they had just learned—by the sheer *horror* of Taiju staying conscious for centuries, alone with his thoughts. It wasn't something they could just laugh away. But still, the atmosphere *lightened*, just a little. Because seeing Senku joke like that again—*that* was something worth holding onto.

A stone eye lay barely visible beneath the tangled leaves, untouched and unchanged by the relentless march of time.

How many millennia?

Well, I won't lose!

The world continued to shift, reshape, and reclaim itself—but Taiju's determination remained an unmovable force, unchanged by the ages.

I am going to tell Yuzuriha!

Above, the corroded remains of the Tokyo Skytree, worn down by centuries of decay, finally gave way. The top half groaned under the weight of time before breaking apart, crashing to the ground in a thunderous collapse. Statues—once people—shattered beneath the impact, their stone bodies fracturing into scattered fragments, their forms lost forever.

But even as civilization crumbled to dust, Taiju's resolve burned.

I WILL LIVE NO MATTER WHAT!

The Earth turned. Centuries, then millennia, passed. The last scars of human civilization faded, overtaken by the quiet persistence of nature. A deer lifted its head, nostrils flaring as it sniffed the air, then calmly stepped forward. Its young followed closely, their cautious steps muffled by thick grass as they disappeared past the treeline. From this vantage point, Mount Fuji stood tall and untouched, looming over a world that had reset itself. As far as the eye could see, there were only forests, rolling hills, and mountains stretching endlessly into the horizon.

Not a single trace of mankind's once-mighty presence remained.

And then—

A single drop of yellow liquid fell through the darkness.

"There it is," Senku muttered, tilting his head slightly. "When you think about the odds… honestly, it could have been *anyone.* But because it was me, I managed to figure it out."

Gen exhaled, his usual smirk subdued. "We could have completely eroded before anyone ever met the right circumstances to revive." He folded his arms, his gaze lingering on the screen. "Scary thought."

It was hard to imagine it happening *any* other way—but the fact that it nearly *didn't* happen at all? That was something else entirely.

Amid a sun-dappled forest, a dimly lit cave yawned open, its entrance half-hidden by creeping vines and twisted roots. Outside, petrified statues lay entangled in the earth's slow embrace—ensnared by thick roots, swallowed by dense underbrush, their once-human forms now little more than relics of a lost era.

Inside the cave, where the light barely reached, a single stone figure rested face-down atop a bed of dry grass.

Taiju.

Unmoving. Unchanged.

Waiting.

"He looks like he was *placed* there," Chrome observed confidently, his sharp eyes scanning the scene.

"Correct! Ten billion points to you, Chrome," Senku announced with a smirk. "You'll see soon enough, but to make a long story, short—I'm the one who put him there."

Above, bats clung to the cave's ceiling, unmoving in the dim light as a yellowish fluid dripped steadily from the stalactites. Each drop fell with an almost rhythmic precision, landing softly on Taiju's stony cranium. The sound of a single drop echoed, then—*crack*. A small fissure formed over his petrified eye, the stone splitting with a harsh, splintering sound. Fragments of his stone exterior began to chip away, revealing the faintest hint of movement beneath. Taiju's brown eye darted, wide and alert, taking in the damp surroundings as he regained his awareness. As the cracks spread, deepening and cascading across his stone body, Taiju's body tensed. He *exerted* himself, gathering every ounce of energy he had. Then, with a mighty roar, his voice ripped through the silence of the cave.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRHHGHHH!"

Ukyo winced and covered his ears, the sheer intensity of Taiju's scream rattling through the room. The sound was so deafening that even the TV's audio stuttered under the pressure, the screen flickering momentarily as the decibels of Taiju's roar reverberated through the air.

Rising, the stone encasing Taiju crumbled away, revealing his robust, entirely human form, still raw and unclothed.

"I've broken free!"

His voice rang out, wild, more so now. Two jagged scars ran across his face—one starting from his eyebrow, the other from his hairline, both ending just below his eyes.

"I've broken free! Finally... huh?" Taiju glanced at his hand, noticing stone remnants clinging to it. "Stone… fragments?"

His gaze shifted toward the cave's entrance.

Not far off, a ravine stretched out, filled with statues. Many were trapped by nature, partly embedded in the earth. The steep sides of the ravine were lined with figures in various states of disrepair—armless, legless, even headless. Among them, a young boy's head protruded from the soil, one eye wide in terror, the other side of his face missing.

"I'm glad that, for the most part, Tsukasa avoided waking us and just letting us see it..." Ukyo admitted.

"I see… everyone, like I thought..." Taiju muttered softly, his voice thick with realization. "So that is what happened…"

He paused, a deep breath escaping him as the gravity of it settled in.

"...Just how much time has passed?"

Taiju brought his hands together in a silent prayer and bowed his head, his expression solemn.

"I'm sorry…" His voice cracked slightly as he looked down at the broken statue of a girl before him. Each shattered piece was carefully arranged, as if trying to return her to her proper place. "…This is all I can do for you right now…"

"Taiju, you really are a stand-up guy," Kohaku remarked, watching him carefully place the broken pieces of the girl back together. There was no reason to do this other than out of respect for her.

Senku gritted his teeth, turning his gaze away as his eyebrows furrowed in frustration.

Senku-chan? Gen asked himself internally, his mind registering the shift in Senku's behavior. It stood out—especially because Gen knew that, more often than not, Senku's reactions to Taiju's actions were overwhelmingly positive and supportive. But this was different. This was the first time Gen had seen him look anything other than *that*…

He pivoted and set off.

Navigating through the woods, Taiju encountered statues interspersed amongst the natural landscape.

He paused to quench his thirst from a flowing river.

"I guess there's nothing to it but to wake up in this world and start drinking straight from the stream, not a thought in your head. You really are something else, Taiju."

"Why wouldn't he?" Chrome asked, glancing between Kohaku, who looked just as confused, and Senku, hoping for some clarity.

Senku's gaze turned distant as he began to explain. "He, alongside the rest of us 'modern' folk, originated from an era where potable water wasn't easily accessible. The majority of it had been contaminated by industrial waste and chemical leaching. It's a challenge you're unfamiliar with in your time." His expression grew contemplative. *I've been working to rebuild the world, focusing on sustainable resources. But complete sustainability is still elusive, especially with our dependence on metallurgical processes. This is what happens when you erase history—you end up repeating its mistakes.*

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown," Gen whispered under his breath, sensing where Senku's thoughts had wandered.

Senku shrugged, his gaze turning away. He kept the weight of it to himself.

"As long as the terrain hasn't changed too much, I should be able to follow the river back there…"

He pulled some leafy vines from a nearby tree, fashioning them around his waist for a semblance of modesty.

"…to that Camphor Tree."

"He still has his priorities perfectly in order!" Ryusui exclaimed with a laugh, trying to cut through the heavy atmosphere that had settled over the group.

"Not how I would put it," Senku snickered, his voice light but with a hint of amusement. "I call that level of Neanderthal logic *thinking with your dick.*"

Gen raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. He wanted to ask, but honestly, any romantic inclinations Senku might have had would probably be explained in time—so why bother digging for answers when they'd eventually come, as always, with patience?

A female voice piped up, "Did something just drop?"

"A stone carving of a bird?" another girl inquired, her curiosity piqued.

There, nestled gently among the hedge's foliage, rested a meticulously carved stone bird, its details finely etched as if frozen in mid-flight.

"I thought the birds got frozen a little quicker compared to when you guys got petrified," Chrome admitted, his brow furrowed in thought as he adjusted his estimates.

"It wasn't too far apart," Senku responded, his tone casual but with an undercurrent of contemplation. He hadn't been keeping precise measurements of time back then, so there was no real way to know exactly how much time had passed. But he knew it had been at least a few days—enough for him to conduct some research and publish his theory on the swallows to his fellow scientists.

"The craftsmanship is incredible! Look at those detailed feathers!" one of the girls exclaimed, her voice full of admiration.

In the present-day setting, smartphones were quickly drawn, and the girls began snapping photos, their admiration evident in their expressions.

"It looks so real."

"Maybe it is real." Taiju suddenly interrupted, his school uniform still on, catching the girls off guard as he too inspected the stone bird.

"My friend said he saw one like that somewhere else. He posted a picture of it."

Taiju carefully picked up the bird, his expression softening.

"Poor thing. Maybe it is some sort of bird disease that hardens their skin."

Taiju paused before a glass door, taking a breath to steady himself. A poster depicting various animals and a timetable for the clinic’s hours were displayed on the door. Protectively holding the bird against his chest, he looked at the door with a mix of longing and frustration.

"Of course, the animal clinic isn’t going to be open before school starts," he muttered, his tone both resigned and slightly exasperated.

"You guys would bring your animals to the... doctor?" Kohaku asked, trying to process it. "To make sure they were good to eat?"

"Sometimes it was for cultivation," Ukyo explained, his voice calm. "But usually, it was just because we kept many animals as pets."

Chrome lowered his gaze, the weight of old memories settling in. "We used to have some of those in the village a long time ago... but they're not allowed anymore. Actually... now that I think about it, it was only recently that it was lifted and Suika got Chalk. We just had too many food shortages and..."

That's the reality in this stone world, Gen thought, shaking his head. The loss was felt in the silence that followed.

Taiju's head snapped up in surprise at the sound of a female voice. Standing just a few steps away, Yuzuriha observed him with a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

"You never think things through, do you?" she asked, her tone both playful and exasperated.

"He ten billion percent thinks nothing through, and that's why..."

His eyes widened, taken aback. "But, this carving... I thought maybe—"

"—that it was real? And so you brought it to an animal clinic?" Yuzuriha interjected, her gaze teasing. She paused for a moment, letting the words settle in before continuing. "It looks so stupid," she added with a playful reprimand, her tone light but affectionate.

She quickly averted her eyes, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. "It's embarrassing."

"Knowing what we know, this is kind of harsh... Are you okay, Taiju?" Chrome asked, turning toward their friend. Taiju was crying, but a massive smile spread across his face as he nodded cheerfully. His gaze was fixed on the TV, eyes distant yet filled with a kind of deep nostalgia.

For a brief moment, Taiju looked mortified, his gaze darting everywhere except toward her. *Of all people, why does Yuzuriha have to be the one to run into me right when I'm acting like an idiot…?*

He paused, blinking in confusion. *Huh?*

Yuzuriha held up an identical stone bird, her smile mischievous as she teased, "Yup, and here's another clueless one who didn't think things through. Imagine that!"

"... They are ten billion percent perfect for one another~!" Senku finished with a laugh. He didn't know exactly why, but the moment he saw Yuzuriha standing there in front of the

animal hospital, he had a strong feeling. It was just like those two softhearted friends of his—*too perfect* for one another.

He blinked in surprise, then a smile slowly spread across his face, gradually evolving into genuine laughter. Yuzuriha rolled her eyes with mock annoyance. "Come on, cut it out!"

"Both of us will definitely be late for school now," she continued, trying to hold back her own giggles.

Taiju, still laughing, nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you're right!"

"You two are so cute together!" Kohaku exclaimed, her voice practically bubbling with excitement.

Senku instinctively leaned away from her. *Excited females like this were never good.* Sure, he had never seen Kohaku in this kind of mood before, but when girls started seeing relationships on screens, things tended to get...

Obsessed, both Gen and Senku thought simultaneously, the ominous feeling rising between them as Kohaku opened her mouth to speak again.

"You should confess to her the second we get back!" Kohaku demanded more than suggested, her tone firm and unyielding.

"Would that really be okay?" Taiju asked, rubbing the back of his neck shyly, completely unaware of the impending storm.

You big oaf... Senku thought, barely able to believe his ears. *Even after all of this, you're still asking that question?*

The flashback faded, and Taiju stood before the tree. His eyes widened in recognition.

"Yuzuriha," he whispered, stepping into the sunlit clearing. "I could never mistake you. Even after thousands of years..."

He walked forward, his steps steady but heavy with emotion, until he came face-to-face with a towering tree root.

"You've been alive, haven't you? Since that day. All this time..."

Finally, he reached the base of an immense tree. Encased within its massive roots, secured against its grand trunk a few meters above the ground, was a stone figure of a girl. Her distinct white hairband stood out against the grey stone, a stark contrast that brought his heart to his throat. Delicate green vines wove around her, framing her face like a quiet tribute to the years she had been trapped in stone.

"Did you think she would be awake, Taiju?" Kohaku asked, her tone surprisingly gentle, almost as if she were speaking to Ruri.

"Well! I had hoped... but obviously, I didn't really think..." Taiju trailed off, his voice faltering as memories of that day flooded back, the weight of his feelings pressing down on him.

Taiju's expression softened into a smile, his eyes filled with quiet admiration. "Good job staying alive! Well done, camphor tree!" he murmured, his voice thick with gratitude. "You protected Yuzuriha from washing away and breaking apart, didn't you? All this time…"

"It's amazing that the camphor tree stayed alive this long. It's incredible what's possible when humanity isn't in the picture," Senku remarked offhandedly, his tone casual but thoughtful.

"Do you know what their lifespan typically is?"

Senku paused for a moment, his mind shifting gears as he began to analyze. "With a documented lifespan exceeding 1,000 years in Japan, a 3,700-year longevity is truly remarkable. It's plausible that the tree assimilated certain petrification properties from the surrounding soil matrix. These properties could confer resistance to biotic stressors, possibly deterring pest infestations. Additionally, the presence of the life-like statue of Yuzuriha might act as a deterrent for avian species—"

He trailed off, his mind working through the possibilities aloud.

His countenance grew somber, his voice heavy with emotion. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you. No..." Taiju knelt, bowing his head in reverence to the tree and the stone figure it cradled. "Actually, you were the one who was protecting me, Yuzuriha."

Yuzuriha's stone visage gazed emptily ahead, frozen in time.

"It's your memory that kept me anchored, even as the world changed around me. In that unending solitude, for centuries... *Millennia*…"

"Taiju..." Ukyo muttered, his expression laced with concern.

"It's fine!" Taiju insisted, his voice more upbeat than before. "It was worth it to be here and help everyone bring civilization back!"

"Damn right!" Senku declared, a vicious grin spreading across his face, his usual enthusiasm ignited by Taiju's words.

Lifting his gaze, Taiju's face softened into a tender smile.

"Now, I can finally voice it. Hear me, Yuzuriha. The words I yearned to say that day... continuing from where we were paused... all those ages ago…"

"EHHH!? You can't do it now!" Ryusui cried, popping a snack into his mouth, clearly taking the movie night vibe *a little* too seriously.

Or maybe we needed the levity, and Ryusui noticed, Gen theorized, his expression amused.

His eyes glistened with unshed tears, the blurring of his vision making everything feel distant. A soft sniffle broke the silence, and before long, he succumbed to his emotions, his face crumpling in raw grief. Images of Yuzuriha, her gaze turning to meet his beneath the tree canopy, faded like wisps of a fading dream.

"My love for you has spanned..."

Kohaku watched with misty eyes, her expression uncharacteristically soft, something only her sister might evoke. "We'll never be able to understand, will we? That level of determination..."

"Don't sell yourself short, Kohaku," Senku responded, absentmindedly picking at his ear without looking at her. "You're the type of person who would run hot spring water to your sister every day without fail. You aren't lacking in pig-headed, moronic levels of determination either."

"Senku..." Kohaku muttered, giving him a smile he couldn't see.

The gentle rustle of leaves filled the silence as Taiju found his feet once more. When his gaze returned to Yuzuriha, it was different—now smoldering with unyielding resolve and profound intensity. With fierce determination, he struck the tree beside her petrified form. Leaning forward, his eyes locked onto hers, stone-set and unblinking.

"I promise, Yuzuriha, I will bring you back! I might not have a clear path yet, but I vow —"

His declaration cut off abruptly, his gaze drawn down to his hand. Etched into the bark, right where his hand had made contact, were the words:

Follow the river downstream, big oaf.

"Yeah, that's just like our Senku-chan! 3,700 years, and not even an 'I missed you.' Not like I expected anything different," Gen shrugged, his tone laced with mock amusement.

Chrome blinked, a little caught off guard. "How did you know he would—"

"Calculated the odds," Senku interrupted smoothly, his voice matter-of-fact. "Taiju didn't have many options. The most likely scenario was him checking on her status, and there was a tiny chance he'd think I could reverse it. But considering the predictable nature of his teenage brain, it wasn't exactly a hard guess."

Chrome's eyes widened slightly. "Wait, but how—?"

"Odds, Chrome," Senku cut in, turning back to the TV screen with his usual air of indifference. "Not hard to figure out."

> The view followed the riverbank as it wound through the landscape. Panting heavily, Taiju came to a stop beneath an overhanging tree limb, the exertion from his relentless running clear in every labored breath. He inhaled deeply, his chest rising and falling as his eyes lifted to the branch above him.
>
> "Heheh…"
>
> Perched atop the branch, Senku met Taiju's gaze, a sly smirk tugging at his lips. His face, like Taiju's, bore distinctive crack-like scars, but Senku's were symmetrical—extending vertically from the inner corners of his brows and ending just beneath his eyes.

"Senku-chan, did you wake up with that new hairstyle, or did you purposely style it that way because you thought it looked cool with the new scars?"

Senku rolled his eyes, suppressing the flush that threatened to rise to his cheeks. It was childish, of course—one of the little immaturities he allowed himself when he first woke up. With a resigned sigh, he finally grumbled, "Mentalist..."

Jackpot, Gen thought inwardly, relishing in the embarrassed energy radiating from their leader.

> Senku's appearance had undergone significant changes. His green locks now framed his face with two stray strands, falling loosely to each side. The young genius wore a

makeshift short-sleeved tunic crafted from animal hides, the bold red embroidery of the equation $E=mc^2$ proudly displayed near his collarbone. A series of straps cinched at his waist, holding a rudimentary belt from which various pouches and small packages hung. His slender forearms were wrapped in bandages, and his feet were clad in basic footwear, all seemingly fashioned from the same crude material. In one hand, he held a bundle of sticks, and in the other, a primitive stone axe, his grip steady and purposeful.

"Where did you get the dye for the equation, anyway? Black dye is rare," Ukyo asked, studying their leader's appearance closely.

Heh, I don't want to answer that honestly, Senku thought to himself, weariness settling in. He didn't think it was a topic worth addressing right now, and if it came up later, he'd deal with it then. Instead, he shrugged it off and replied, "You can obtain black dye through a process involving certain fungi. As the mushrooms oxidize and turn black, a chemical reaction takes place. Once the reaction reaches its desired state, you can filter out the remaining organic matter to yield a purified dye."

Gen noticed the deflection immediately. Senku could feel the Mentalist's eyes on him, but he ignored it.

The damned Mentalist is too intelligent for his own good, Senku silently grumbled.

Senku couldn't help but feel a flush of heat spread across his body at the weight of Gen's gaze. He forced himself to focus on the task at hand, pushing the discomfort aside.

"So you're finally awake, you big oaf."

Senku cracked a slight grin, his eyes narrowing slightly as he prepared for what was coming.

"WHOAAAAH!"

Without warning, Taiju clambered up the tree and practically dove at him, tears flying everywhere. Senku's eyes widened in surprise as he twisted to the side, narrowly avoiding the full force of Taiju's enthusiastic embrace.

"YOU WERE ALIVE! SENKUUUUUUUU!"

"I can't imagine how much of a relief that must be," Ukyo muttered, his voice thoughtful. "You get to wake up and realize that your best friend is also awake and safe..."

He trailed off, the weight of his words sinking in. Everyone, upon waking, had someone already awake—someone there to explain it all, to share in the relief. Everyone... except Senku. Ukyo's gaze shifted toward their scientist, and for a brief moment, he wondered how Senku had managed to stay sane through it all. Then, almost as quickly, the thought crossed his mind—*Was he even sane to begin with?*

Taiju lunged forward, attempting to hug the smaller boy around the waist, weeping loudly. Senku, horrified, quickly decided to ward him off with the bottom of his foot.

"Don't hug me while you're almost *butt naked!* I'll kill you!" Senku snapped, his voice sharp as he shoved Taiju back.

"I'm glad it was Taiju..." Ukyo admitted, following his earlier thoughts. Senku deserved it. After working so hard to get so much done, the scientist earned it.

Once they were back on the ground, Senku sighed deeply, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Today is October 5th, the year 5738..." He paused, glancing at Taiju with a slight smile. "You slept in for a hell of a long time. I've been up and working for over six months already."

"I guess it makes sense that Senku was the one who figured out what date it was. Did you calculate based on the level of erosion?" Ukyo asked, his tone curious. "Tsukasa was smart but not the mathematical type."

Senku didn't bother to answer, simply pointing toward the TV with a quiet shrug.

Taiju stared at Senku, then glanced down at his fingers, as if trying to count. "That means… It has been…"

"A good 3,700 years have passed," Senku interrupted, not missing a beat.

Taiju let out a surprised sound. "How can you tell exactly what date it is?"

"I just counted," Senku replied, unfazed. "How else would I know?"

"You can't mean..." Ryusui muttered under his breath, horror creeping across his face.

As the realization hit him, Ukyo's earlier curiosity shifted into something darker. *There was no way, right?*

Chrome and Kohaku had heard bits and pieces before—Gen had mentioned it at some point in passing—but they didn't truly understand. Not really. They hadn't been in that emptiness, hadn't felt the pull toward the abyss that promised an end to the overwhelming void.

Taiju just stared at him, astonished.

The darkness seemed to stretch on endlessly, as the screen went to black, the silence broken only by Senku's low voice as he counted, "Four, five, six… seven, eight…"

A deep red eye snapped open, glaring into the void, seeing nothing.

"Damn, I almost lost consciousness again." His voice was a murmur, thick with weariness, as if the very act of speaking drained him further. "I hit that point every 800,000 seconds or so—got to be more mindful. Think and count at the same time. If I slip up, even for a second, I might never wake up again."

The weight of those words settled in the silence, his mind teetering on the edge of exhaustion. The constant battle to keep himself anchored in the waking world, the precise mental calculations that kept him tethered to consciousness, was wearing him down more than he cared to admit.

Senku's petrified body lay flat on the ground, deep in a forest overrun by moss. His unseeing stone eyes stared vacantly at the night sky.

"Use your brain in parallel… 116,427,065,530 seconds…"

"Senku..." Ukyo uttered, his voice faltering, as if there were no words that could adequately express his thoughts.

Ryusui, normally full of energy, now wore an unnaturally severe frown, his eyes fixed on the unfolding scene with a rare intensity.

Gen, on the other hand, was almost giddy, his reaction in stark contrast to the others. A barely noticeable twitch passed through his body, one he couldn't quite hide. Senku... *Senku was just as miraculous now as he was then.*

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven..."

"Theoretically, if I could stabilize the resonance frequencies between the atomic structures... I could increase efficiency in cellular regeneration by adjusting the molecular vibrations. But no, that's not the priority right now. Focus. Counting. Stay awake."

"You can think of that many different things simultaneously?" Ryusui asked, his voice full of incredulity.

Senku turned a deadpan stare toward him. "It's really not that different from keeping track of the wind direction while you direct the ship."

It's definitely very different, they all thought to themselves.

"Pardon us for thinking it's a little different, considering you're sitting there counting while spitting out scientific theories that we can't even begin to comprehend," Gen pointed out, a playful smirk tugging at his lips. He wasn't about to let Senku wiggle out of a compliment, no matter how much the scientist tried to downplay it.

"In that darkness?" Taiju questioned, trailing Senku through the dappled sunlight filtering through the trees. "Every single moment?"

"If I had merely relied on willpower to wake up and found myself naked in the winter, scrambling for food, it would've been the end of me right there," Senku replied pragmatically, the bundle of sticks tucked securely under his arm. "Waking up in spring was crucial for survival. Keeping track of time was indispensable."

At least I avoided January and February. Those would have been killer months...

"How did keeping track end up helping you?" Gen asked, seizing the opportunity to express his admiration for Senku.

Senku didn't miss the look Gen was giving him, but with a sigh, he replied, "Knowing allows you to understand exactly what type of foraging you need to focus on. Most of the edible plant life in Japan appears during the late summer through October. To streamline the process and avoid wasting energy, it's essential to know what to look for… unless you're a stamina-bound moron with muscles for brains."

"That's me!" Taiju exclaimed, practically puffing out his chest with pride.

They continued walking until they reached a clearing.

"Look, we're here." Senku glanced at Taiju, who came to a halt beside him. "Time to stop blabbering and get to work."

Taiju froze in his tracks, his eyes widening as he gazed up in awe and confusion.

"Senku... did you... did you put this together all on your own?"

Before them stood a sizable treehouse, skillfully crafted from wood with a thatched straw roof. It was perched sturdily on a broad tree branch, supported by several poles. The precision of its construction seemed too intricate to be the work of a single inexperienced teenager.

"It's a simple application of physics to figure out where support needs to be to build something that won't fall," Senku explained, his tone matter-of-fact. He spoke with the usual enthusiasm that came from his love of illuminating the science behind even the most mundane tasks, "Architects have been using this kind of math for thousands of years."

Senku didn’t directly respond to Taiju’s query, instead continuing toward the structure. After a brief pause, he spoke in a hushed, almost reverent tone. "I’m short on hands. Just making sure I have the essentials for survival takes up my entire day."

"An excuse to work us like dogs~!" Gen exclaimed, his tone playful.

Senku snickered, a hint of mischief in his voice. "Just making sure to give you plenty of exercise, Mentalist."

Beneath the treehouse stood a supply of spears and several large clay jars, one of which was filled with mushrooms.

"To advance civilization, I absolutely need a big, muscle-bound stamina-idiot," Senku said, narrowing his eyes meaningfully at Taiju. His dark red gaze burned with emotion. "I was ten billion per cent certain that you were still alive. There’s no way a man so intent on confessing to Yuzuriha would weakly give in after just a few thousand years."

"What would you have done if Taiju..." Ukyo began, before his voice tapered off.

"Nothing you're implying would have ever happened, because Taiju would never give in like that. Still…" Senku paused, his expression darkening slightly. "Probably would have found some other muscle-bound idiot. It might have even been Tsukasa... Without Taiju, though, that would have been the end, huh?"

None of them knew what to say to that, so they stayed silent.

Taiju had closed his eyes, his face set with intense concentration.

"That is not who you are, is it!?"

"Yeah…" Taiju opened his eyes, his expression firm with resolve. "Of course not!"

"I'm counting on you to do the thinking, Senku," Taiju said, some time having passed. He was now dressed in animal skins of a slightly darker color, wielding a stone axe to chop wood. "You can count on me to do the heavy lifting!"

Fire crackled to life, shapes dancing in the flames as Senku spoke, his voice unwavering. "It took humanity two million years to get from the Stone Age to the modern age. We're going to sprint all the way back to the top."

"What did your original timeline look like?" Curiosity was heavily set in Gen's tone.

"Heh," Senku snickered once, shaking his head. "Byakuya really saved our asses there. Pushed the timetable up decades. Without Ishigami Village, we'd be in a pretty hard spot. Once again, Tsukasa would have met his win condition immediately."

A heavy silence hung in the air.

Hesitantly, Ukyo spoke up, "What do you think would have happened if Tsukasa won?"

Senku paused, his gaze distant. "Primarily, there are two likely scenarios. First, illness. Without modern medication, diseases would spread rapidly. Illnesses evolved during our stone era, and it's fortunate that none of the resurrected individuals have contracted anything so far. The immunity we have might be due to the revival process, but its protection is temporary." He continued, his tone sharpening, "Second, internal conflict. The younger generations might hold animosity toward Tsukasa for the death of their elders and the loss of modern conveniences. A revolt could be imminent. Charismatic leadership has its limits." Senku's eyes shifted to Gen. "What do you think, Mentalist?"

Gen thought for a moment before answering, "The second option is quite plausible. When I revived, I had no desire to associate with a group that seemed so intellectually homogeneous. Tsukasa was selective in his choices. He mostly resurrected those who would be loyal or those who lacked the ability to think critically. Exceptions were rare."

Mostly just me and Ukyo... Gen pondered for a moment, then added, "Even though others disagreed with Tsukasa's leadership, they largely agreed with his ideals. He was a motivational speaker through and through. He could have been a career politician in the old world, acting purely on instinct."

Internally, Gen thought *Senku-chan wasn't so bad at it himself, in a completely different way.*

> The firelight flickered in the teen's strange red eyes, his voice filled with gleeful inevitability, as though the bleak circumstances they found themselves in were just a stepping stone. "We are going to take the world back. And I'll figure out the science behind the petrification and our revival."
>
> Across the fire, Taiju's eyes mirrored the same fire, a deep resolve burning within them.
>
> "And save Yuzuriha."

Ryusui grinned. "I always appreciate a man knowing what he wants and using his determination to get it. Your commitment to her is admirable!"

"Thank you!" Taiju exclaimed, his voice full of pride, his back straightening as he stood taller.

> When Senku spoke again, the image of a rocket came into view, his voice steady and filled with conviction. "We, a couple of high school brats, are going to create civilization from scratch..."

"Seeing how quickly you've improved the lives of the village and the Kingdom of Science really is impressive. Science has done so much for us!" Kohaku admitted freely, her voice tinged with appreciation. She recalled the happiness she had felt as they fought against Tsukasa's empire, remembering how each scientific improvement had made life a little easier for the village, step by step.

Senku couldn't help the soft look that flickered in his eyes as he recalled the progress. *Science works like that*, he thought, his mind already working through the next steps. Each invention built on the last, improving the world little by little. He had intentionally designed it to help the village, though he'd never admit that aloud. "That's just how science is, and that's why we will bring it all back."

As much of it as possible, Senku promised himself inwardly.

An unholy grin spread across Senku's face, the cracks on his skin only intensifying the effect.

"Get excited, Taiju. You and I will be the Adam and Eve of this new world."

Senku winced as he heard his own words, a string of disgust shooting through him. At the time, he had simply been thinking about recreating humanity… Not... *recreating humanity.* His mind flashed back to how he had *said* it, how the words had left his mouth so easily. He'd been thinking in purely scientific terms—of survival, of restoring civilization, of the next steps in their grand experiment. But now, with the weight of the words sinking in, he couldn't ignore the uncomfortable realization.

Did I really just say that? He had been focused on practicality—on logic—but he couldn't shake the unease now gnawing at him. He couldn't help but compare the situation to something... *else.* He wasn't just thinking about humanity as a whole; he was considering the dynamics of his relationship with Taiju, and the notion of *"recreating humanity"* felt suddenly... too much. Senku's attraction to intelligence had always shaped his relationships. He admired sharp minds, the clever ones who could challenge him, push him further... Taiju was the kind of guy who would charge headfirst into a problem with all his muscle, without considering the logic of it first.

Universe, why did I say it like that... Senku thought, rubbing his temples. The discomfort only deepened. The mental image of him and Taiju—two opposite extremes—left him feeling even more detached from the original idea.

"Who would be the pregnant one, Senku-chan~?" Gen asked, clearly noticing the discomfort and purposefully making it worse.

Senku huffed at the teasing, rolling his eyes and recovering. "Obviously, I would be the pregnant one. Taiju is needed for collecting food. If I were the one collecting food for me, Taiju, and a parasite, we'd ten billion per cent die of starvation."

2 minutes before playback starts

"A break now? Wonder why...?" Ukyo mused aloud as the words spread across the screen.

Senku, breaking from Gen's teasing, looked thoughtful. "Probably to let us speak with one another about any meaningful observations and whether plans need to be adjusted. I imagine we'll have several smaller breaks between episodes."

Kohaku shrugged. "I have nothing to add."

"Neither do I!" Chrome chimed in.

With everyone in agreement, there was nothing more to say. They simply waited for the recording to restart. Senku couldn't shake the feeling that, at some point, they'd be forced to have far too many serious conversations about the contents of these episodes—and he wasn't looking forward to that.

Chapter 4: Episode 1 Part 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> Taiju sprinted through the forest, a wide grin spread across his face. The sunlight filtered through the trees, catching the gleam in his eyes as he moved with surprising speed. A sizable basket, brimming with mushrooms, plants, and a deceased piglet, was strapped securely to his back. His heavy footsteps echoed in the stillness of the forest as he made his way back to the clearing.
>
> Once he arrived, he dropped the basket with a satisfied thud, presenting it to Senku as if it were a prize. Senku, however, looked at the contents with an almost perturbed expression, his brow furrowed in silent judgment.

"The amount of time Taiju spent gathering for the Kingdom of Science increased our productivity by ten billion per cent," Senku announced, his tone matter-of-fact. "I'd probably still be stuck figuring out how to make the miracle fluid if it weren't for him."

He said it without a hint of shame, fully aware that in this case, his reliance on Taiju's physical prowess had been crucial.

> "The amount is amazing, at least…"
>
> Taiju beamed with pride, a wide grin spreading across his face as Senku spoke.
>
> "-What kind of cheat gave you that stamina, Taiju?"

"It *is* rather freakish," Gen admitted with a grin, tilting his head slightly away from Taiju as he spoke, eyeing him out of the corner of his eye. The sight reminded him of something he'd been meaning to ask Senku—his own little hypothesis that he hadn't found the right moment to bring up. The sheer number of revived individuals that could potentially fit the theory made it seem all the more likely...

Senku hummed lowly in thought, just loud enough for Gen to hear.

Senku-chan agrees then...

Taiju widened his eyes, taken aback by the sound of Senku rummaging through the haul. He watched in dismay as Senku swiftly sifted through the collection, casually discarding most of it into another large basket.

Images of mushrooms and plants flashed by in rapid succession, each passing moment giving Taiju little time to fully comprehend the process.

"Amanita Virosa: poisonous…" Senku muttered, his tone flat. "Zero other uses, just poison."

"Buna Shimeji: edible. Amanita Muscaria: poisonous…" He paused, inspecting the next plant. "Sleep aid? Risky."

"Trying to put us all into a permanent sleep, Senku-chan?" Gen asked teasingly, a smirk tugging at his lips.

Senku puffed his cheeks in mock indignation, "The opposite, though for you, Mentalist, I might consider it."

"Can't you tell this one's bad? It looks like it came straight out of Mario!" Senku muttered with mild irritation, tossing the mushroom aside. "Next... Mugwort: edible. Monkshood... Who are you trying to kill? Idiot." He paused for a moment, inspecting it further. "Useful? Local anesthetic? Risky, but maybe."

"How do you know these things, Senku? I know you're a scientist, but I didn't imagine you'd be the botanist type," Ukyo inquired suddenly.

Senku waved the comment off, his tone casual, though there was a flicker of something faintly nostalgic in his eyes. "I'm not. Byakuya was interested in camping at one point, so I read a book about it when I was around eight." He shrugged, as if it were no big deal. "It was one of those random things he got into, and I just happened to latch onto it because, well, that’s what I did back then. I was curious about everything. So, I read the whole thing. I figured if he was serious about it, I might as well understand what he was on about."

"A book about botany... at eight..." Ukyo echoed, his voice trailing off in disbelief.

"I'm far more interested in astrophysics," Senku added, a small shrug accompanying his words.

"...Eight..." Ukyo repeated again, his tone still stuck on the impossibility of it.

Senku massaged the nape of his neck, sounding almost nonchalant. "It’s essentially an eidetic memory. While a faint version of this trait is observed in many individuals, in a tiny fraction of the population, achieving nearly flawless recall is possible."

The mushrooms and the meat from the piglet sizzled over the fire, skewered on sticks, the warm aroma filling the air.

Taiju, sitting comfortably next to the fire, took a hearty bite of the mushroom-on-a-stick, making satisfied noises as he chewed.

"It's good! How did you season this?"

Senku, sitting across from him on the other side of the fire, casually sprinkled something onto his own mushrooms.

"It's just salt from seawater," Senku explained, his voice smooth as he continued to adjust the seasoning. "Humans can enjoy just about anything with a bit of salt. It’s also essential for food preservation. You could say it’s prehistoric man’s greatest discovery."

Taiju beamed at him, his gratitude shining through.

"Thanks, Senku. For everything! I’ll make up for the thinking I can't do with brute force and diligence!"

With that, he shoved the rest of his food into his mouth and grabbed the basket, already gearing up for his next round. "Time to scavenge the other side!"

"A bottomless pit of energy! That’s our stamina man!" Ryusui declared with a snap of his fingers, grinning widely.

Senku waved a casual goodbye as he continued eating, his attention fixed on his meal.

In a slightly shaded section of the forest, clusters of large purple grapes hung tantalizingly from the vines as Taiju moved through, collecting them.

"Oh, they're wild," Taiju muttered to himself, his eyes lighting up with interest. He reached up to pick a bunch.

"Are these edible? Thinking won't help. Eating some will!" Without hesitation, he shoved several grapes into his mouth. The moment he chewed, his expression contorted in disgust. He quickly spat them out, emitting a series of repulsed sounds as he frantically tried to rid his palate of the unpleasant taste.

"What's wrong with them? Did they go bad?" Kohaku asked; even though they had looked perfectly fine, there was the chance maybe one of the berries had a bug infestation or something.

Chrome perked up proudly, his chest puffing out. "I know the answer to this! Back then, they cultivated these and picked more sweet berries until they eventually had no more tart or bitter flavors. So, the natural ones ended up tasting bad to modern people. Gen explained this to me when I asked why he didn't like the ramen that much!"

Upon raising his gaze, Taiju spotted a remarkable statue nearby. A tall, muscular young man with flowing hair was seated at the base of a large tree. Taiju's eyes widened as he recognized the figure. "I've seen him on TV before. He's the 'strongest primate high-schooler,' Shishio Tsukasa…"

"There he is..." Ukyo trailed off, his voice quieter now. Even frozen in stone, Tsukasa still cut a terrifying figure, his imposing stature and intense gaze enough to send a chill down anyone's spine.

"It even happened to him?" Taiju murmured, his voice tinged with disbelief.

The scene shifted and the cave—the place of Taiju's initial revival—looked unchanged. Taiju stepped inside, surveying the familiar surroundings. The bats still clung to the ceiling, and the yellow fluid continued to drip down steadily. But there was one notable difference: an upright clay jar sat on the cave floor, catching the dripping liquid. To his surprise, it was nearly full.

"This is…"

Taiju's eyes widened in shock.

"WHOOOAAAH! Someone besides me and Senku survived!"

"You didn't think it was Senku-chan?" Gen asked with a teasing grin, looking at the stamina freak.

Taiju looked a little sheepish, scratching the back of his neck. "It makes sense it was Senku... I think I just wished it had been someone new."

Senku grinned mischievously at his friend, "Was I not good enough, big oaf? That hurts."

"You'll be okay!" Taiju declared with a wide grin, his cheerfulness unwavering.

Senku snickered under his breath, shaking his head. It was nearly impossible to tease Taiju. The guy rarely let anything get to him. The only real exception was Yuzuriha—but even then, it was tough to get under his skin. His friend was just too genuine.

Taiju grinned widely.

"Who left it here?!"

Behind him, Senku responded in the most deadpan voice, "I did, idiot."

Taiju stiffened in surprise, dramatically spinning around to face him.

"IT WAS YOU?!" He paused, his expression shifting into something more serious. "Are there really no other humans left in the world?"

"For the record, it's unlikely but not impossible," Senku piped up thoughtfully. "The biggest chance for more humans lies in whether or not Ishigami Village has had offshoots in the past. Even then, it's still possible that other humans figured out how to revive each other. But if that's the case, it likely wasn't long ago, or they didn't have the scientific knowledge to recreate a cure. They might've started their own village, one that could be prospering somewhere else."

Senku came to stand beside Taiju, both of them eyeing the fluid.

"We'll get more humans. That's a top priority," he said with a sardonic look, glancing at Taiju. "Besides, what future does humanity have with just the two of us trudging along?"

Even if we could procreate, which is ten billion per cent impossible... Senku recoiled inwardly at the thought. The very idea of procreation with someone who couldn't even spell the word was repulsive. No offense to Taiju, *not that he would get offended anyway,* , but Senku cringed at the idea of being romantically or even physically connected to someone lacking intellectual depth... The idea nearly made him gag.

"How rude," Gen nonchalantly challenged, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "A little bit of an over-exaggeration, don't you think?"

Senku shot back without missing a beat, his voice deadpan. "Think about fucking your brother and get back to me on your own reaction." He mentally added, *Not a one-to-one comparison. My reaction is mostly because I can't stand the thought of being with an idiot, but he is also essentially my brother, so... same difference.*

"That's true."

Senku's internal voice cut through immediately: *That's beside the point, anyway. There are far more exciting things in play. Time to clue you in, big oaf...*

"Do you really find it all that interesting?" Ukyo asked, his voice tinged with curiosity.

Senku paused, genuinely reflecting on the question. "That is... It..." *How do you even begin to explain how dull life is without proper challenges?*

Gen's teasing voice broke the silence. "I've never seen you at a loss for words before, Senku-chan."

Senku gave a small shrug, his tone pragmatic. "I guess I can explain, since I doubt this will come up. Trying to figure this out—this*petrification* thing—has been the most stimulated my brain has been since I stopped talking to my mentor years ago. Without proper stimulation, I start to get bored, and when I get bored, it's... not pretty." His eyes flickered with a brief flash of frustration. "*I* do stupid things—like research trips to the other side of the planet—for just a sliver of interest."

Gen blinked in surprise at the matter-of-fact way Senku had relayed this. Usually, someone with high intellect had issues with over-stimulation, not under-stimulation. Gen could relate more to the latter—his world had brightened once the noise of constant information was gone. He didn't need to sift through every passerby's life story in his mind.

We've found this to be a weirdly good experience in two entirely different ways. But nevertheless, interesting, Senku-chan, Gen thought to himself, now understanding something new about their leader.

"Besides..." Senku moved toward the stone fragments scattered on the ground, his expression thoughtful. "After 3,700 years, why exactly did our petrification dissolve now?"

"The stone rotted?" Taiju guessed, looking at the fragments. Senku winced slightly at the wording but gave a small nod.

"Yeah. If this weird mineral was corroded, it's suspicious that we came out nearly simultaneously," Senku said, holding a piece of the stone in his hand. His grin widened. "Only six months apart after 3,700 years. There's always a logical explanation behind every coincidence."

"What's the logical explanation behind you being the one who coincidentally woke up with enough scientific knowledge to actually attempt to reverse everything?" Gen challenged, his tone playful.

Senku shrugged casually. "The logical explanation is that sometimes there's luck involved." He paused, adding with a mischievous grin, "Or maybe my alien hypothesis is right. Maybe they're watching us right now and purposely revived me as part of some sick experiment to

see how close we can get to rebuilding society, only to take it all back with another petrification wave."

"Don't be so bleak, Senku!" Chrome cheered, his voice upbeat. "No matter the reason, science will come out on top!"

Senku shrugged again, deciding not to mention that any alien capable of messing with them like that would most certainly have more advanced science than even him. The thought gnawed at him slightly, but he quickly pushed it aside. After all, if they were being watched by some otherworldly force, there wasn't much he could do about it—yet. The idea that someone, or something, might have orchestrated their situation, might be toying with them, was unsettling. But as much as it bothered him, he couldn't let it distract him from his goal. There was no room for such worries when he still had a world to rebuild.

He looked up at the ceiling, his gaze following the slow drip of the yellow liquid. "Both you and I washed up near this cave and were under that dripping stuff up there."

Senku pointed upwards at the yellow liquid, which continued to drip steadily into the jar below. Above, the ceiling was thick with bats, their wings rustling lightly.

"It's a miracle liquid made from bat guano… Nitric acid. That's what caused the erosion of the stone and freed us."

Taiju's eyes went wide in shock. "What?! NITRIC ACID?!"

For a split second, Senku was taken aback. *The oaf knows what that is?* His surprise was short-lived, though, as Taiju's typical reaction took over.

"-but what is THAT?!" Taiju exclaimed, his expression filled with confusion.

Of course. Senku shook his head with a knowing sigh. *Shouldn't have doubted it for a second.*

"I knew you'd say that, you big oaf," Senku muttered, picking up the bottle of nitric acid. They turned and began walking out of the cave. "I'm not gonna waste my time explaining even the gist of it. You won't understand the science, but..."

Senku carefully poured a little of the nitric acid onto a stone swallow, positioned delicately on a tree stump. It was part of an experiment Senku had used dozens of times in the past. Hundreds of swallows, meticulously studied and experimented on in his search for answers.

Taiju watched with anticipation, squinting at the bird. "So that means that if we use this... something-or-other acid, the stone will decay, and they will revive?"

Senku finished pouring the liquid, watching closely for any sign of change. "It would be nice if things were that simple..."

The stone bird remained lifeless. Taiju and Senku stared at it, as if their combined intensity could somehow coax it back to life. Senku's eyes were fixed on the bird, silently willing it to change, for just the faintest flicker of life to return. He wanted it to work so badly; a small clue, a tiny indication that they were on the right track. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Taiju sighed deeply, his shoulders slumping with defeat. Senku dropped to the ground behind the stump, his frustration boiling beneath the surface.

He leaned back, rubbing his face with both hands. "We'll figure it out. Somehow."

Typically, Senku-chan doesn't allow himself to display being put out like that... Gen contemplated, his eyes narrowing slightly as he observed Senku. The Senku before them was subtly different from the one they were used to now. He was still undeniably mature, far more so than anyone his age had a right to be, but there was a hint of something more childish when it came to Taiju—something they never saw in the Senku they knew now.

Gen's gaze flicked to Senku again, and when he noticed the slight stiffening of the scientist's shoulders, Gen didn't bother to look away in embarrassment. He simply kept watching, his curiosity piqued.

They stood in front of a modest hut on the edge of their clearing. It was of similar build and size to the treehouse, though its simple structure gave it a more grounded, practical feel. Above the entrance hung a small, hand-painted sign that simply read *'Laboratory.'*

"I've been trying like a madman," Senku muttered as he carried the stone bird into the hut, Taiju following closely behind with his basket still strapped to his back. "Using every method available to me."

Inside the hut was a cluttered wooden work table, shelves packed with various items. Clay jars and small pots lined the shelves, while different rocks and crude, handmade tools were scattered across the surfaces. The faint smell of old earth and chemicals hung in the air, blending with the scent of the surrounding forest.

Taiju paused in surprise, taking in the scene before him. The makeshift laboratory looked chaotic, yet there was a sense of purpose behind it all.

"Even Taiju is surprised..." Ukyo observed, his initial surprise fading as the camera panned to reveal the laboratory in its entirety.

The shelves lining the back wall of the laboratory were filled with stone swallows—countless of them, placed along every inch of the interior.

“…So many times… hundreds of times…”

Senku set the swallow back on the shelf among its countless fellows.

Gen took in the obsessive trials in this room with no real surprise. Scientists were known for this—try and try again until success, even when the odds stacked against them. It reminded him of Thomas Edison and his thousand attempts at the lightbulb, the kind of relentless, almost maddening persistence that blurred the line between genius and insanity. But even Edison had only been chasing light. Senku was chasing something far more impossible—life itself. Hundreds of setbacks. And yet, instead of stopping, instead of accepting the limitations of reality like any normal person would, Senku had kept going. No hesitation. No despair. Just a mind too stubborn, too brilliant to accept anything less than a solution. And no matter how many times the world told him ‘no,’ he would keep working until he carved out a ‘yes.’

Gen let a small smile creep onto his lips.

"Seeing that kind of determination really lights a fire in you," Ryusui remarked, his voice still carrying but sharper, more serious than usual.

Gen shrugged. "After hearing about him counting for thousands of years, can anything compare?"

"I don't impress you anymore, Mentalist?"

"You've given yourself a hard act to follow," Gen replied, his eyes glinting with amusement.

Senku rolled his eyes and turned back to the screen. Gen still had the same lying face—eyes half-lidded, smile just sharp enough to be unreadable, every expression carefully curated to keep people guessing.

"This is already in the realm of fantasy. Is it mineral? Cellular? I don't even have the equipment to find out. Makes my brain itch—I'd kill to get this thing under a microscope."

"Senku, when Taiju mentioned the birds earlier, he said you took a picture of one. Did you suspect something back then?" Ukyo suddenly asked.

Senku leaned back slightly in his chair, a grin tugging at his lips. He liked thoughtful questions. "I figured out pretty early that the birds were real. The details—the rate at which they were petrified—didn't add up. I sent the information to some of my contacts in the scientific world… but we can assume nothing was figured out in time to change anything."

Ryusui rubbed his chin in thought. "You were young. I imagine most adults wouldn't take something like this seriously coming from someone our age. Do you know if they actually looked into it?"

"Even the most judgmental scientists won't ignore hard evidence—at least, not the good ones." Senku's voice was confident, but his red eyes drifted, calculating. Contemplating. No, he knew the information had reached Xeno, even if not immediately. Whether it had mattered in the end was another question entirely.

Ukyo brought the conversation full circle. "My point is, did you ever look at it under a microscope?"

Senku let out a small, disappointed huff. "I was more focused on tracking the phenomenon at the time. I used social media to map where the birds were appearing. My next step was to find one and examine it properly, but by the time I'd gathered enough data to turn over to the other scientists, I had barely gotten a glimpse at the damn thing."

Taiju tilted his head, curiosity creeping into his voice. "So there are things in this world that even science can't explain?"

He barely had time to process the thought before Senku erupted into laughter. "There we go again with that tired cliché!" Senku smirked, shaking his head. "That's why you hypothesize and experiment—over and over again. Science isn't about instant answers. It's a slow process."

But that was what made it exciting. Developing solutions, testing theories—that was where the real fun lay. Anyone could use the science that already existed, but discovering something new? That was on a different level entirely.

Senku's smirk widened as his thoughts raced through the possibilities, theories stacking in his mind like puzzle pieces waiting to be tested. One in particular stood out. "If only I had liquor, though…"

"It's official—you're way too excited about this!" Kohaku declared.

"I'll keep that in mind next time you get fired up about beating someone into shape, lioness," Senku remarked, lazily scratching the inside of his ear.

He didn't notice the way Taiju's eyes widened with realization as he kept talking. Behind Senku, in the background, cartoonish drawings of bat guano and a bottle of wine popped up, accompanied by hastily scrawled text:

[C_2H_5OH (ethanol) + HNO_3 (nitric acid)]

"Looks like Senku-chan did some video editing," Gen chuckled, eyeing the graphics. It was all very much Senku's style.

"Obviously, we have to make sure it flows right," Senku said, his tone completely *not* defensive about the artistic choices he had made.

Kohaku stared at the equation, her eyes unfocused, as if the very sight of it was straining her patience.

"BAD! I'm guessing that's the math for the miracle cure?" Chrome blurted out. Having never seen it written out like that before, he gawked at the formula. "You've talked about it before, Senku, but seeing it written down like that makes it look complicated—and bad as hell."

"You like that, Chrome?" Senku's grin took on a distinctly wicked edge. "Good. I'll put you through mathematical hell later."

Chrome, instead of looking intimidated, only seemed more excited.

Senku continued explaining, "If I had liquor, I could combine the nitric acid and ethanol to make nital!"

In the background, a bottle labeled **NITAL** appeared on the screen.

"It’s literally an industrial-strength etching agent," he went on, his voice carrying an edge of excitement. "It’s the most likely solution—the key to what woke us up, ten billion percent. In theory, it could revive people even faster." His grin widened, sharp with scientific enthusiasm. *Of course, it could also completely erode the statues, which is why we experiment on swallows first.*

Sounding hesitant, Kohaku softly asked, "What would you have done if there weren’t any swallows?"

The only response was silence.

"What did you just say, Senku?" Taiju interrupted, cutting through his train of thought.

"Huh?"

Senku blinked, momentarily thrown off by the sudden question.

"I said nital. It gets into the ferrite grain boundary and—"

"Don't you know better than that by now, Senku-chan?" Gen snickered, hiding his smile behind his swooping sleeves.

"What is a ferrite grain boundary, Mentalist?" Senku shot back without missing a beat.

Senku-chan is trying to bring me down a peg; so cute~! Gen internally cheered, maybe a little sarcastically. "I’m not exactly an expert on the intricacies, but I’d guess it has to do with the cohesion of 'grains.' For example, metals are tough because their structure is tightly packed, while some rocks are more porous, which makes their boundaries easier to infiltrate. So if

nital can seep into those boundaries, it could accelerate erosion by widening the spaces between each 'grain.'" He let his tone turn playful again. "Of course, I could be completely wrong. I'm no science genius like Senku-chan~!"

Gen watched as Senku absorbed his words, those red eyes flickering slightly to the left of Gen's shoulder instead of making direct eye contact. A sharp inhale. The faintest flush creeping up his neck—

Gen turned away.

Senku-chan really was too much. A reaction like that, huh…

"—Not that! I don't get all that complex stuff," Taiju cut in, shaking his head. "I meant when you said, *if only you had alcohol?*"

Senku turned to him, eyes wide.

Taiju held out his hands, both filled with freshly picked grapes.

"Couldn't we make wine out of grapes?"

For a moment, Senku just stared, perplexed. *Did he really just…?* Then, a slow grin spread across his face.

"Not bad, you big oaf!"

"What would you do without him!" Ryusui exclaimed. "That's exactly why it's important to surround yourself with people who are good at their jobs!"

Senku deadpanned, "There's no one better at blundering around and accidentally finding something useful than the big oaf." A compliment? Maybe. Taiju certainly seemed to think so. He straightened up, beaming as if Senku had just declared him a certified genius.

The background music swelled.

Twilight cast long shadows across the clearing as Senku sat on a tree trunk in front of the laboratory, methodically squeezing grapes between his fingers, letting the juice drip

into a bowl.

Taiju strode past him, hauling a colossal clay tub brimming with grapes. With a triumphant battle cry, he leapt in, feet slamming down as he stomped with wild enthusiasm, crushing the fruit beneath him.

Senku watched in silence. Dumbfounded silence.

"Might for the win! Sometimes the careful way isn't the right way," Kohaku noted with some amusement, her eyes sparkling.

"Ah… okay. You can handle all the grunt work from now on. That's only logical."

Also kind of clever—this was how they used to do it, stomping on grapes. But actually doing it…

"Are you squeamish, Senku-chan?" Gen latched onto the perceived weakness like a leech, eyes glinting with amusement.

Senku kept his expression carefully neutral, the perfect picture of disinterest. "Don't underestimate me, Mentalist. I just have more important things to prepare—to best optimize our time."

Gen let out a slow, exaggerated hum of agreement, his smirk making it clear he wasn't convinced in the slightest. *Gen is way too damn clever.* Senku narrowed his eyes slightly. *This is exactly why that troublesome Mentalist always gets extra busy work.* And if, somewhere deep in his mind, a tiny, scheming Senku was rubbing his hands together with villainous intent, well—only he needed to know that.

The tub was soon filled with deep purplish-red juice, grape skins floating here and there. Taiju worked fast, his energy as boundless as ever.

"Making wine couldn't be easier," Senku remarked, watching as Taiju poured the juice into the jar he held out.

"Crush grapes, raisins, and stuff, toss it into a container, and mix it daily until it's done."

> Taiju stirred the juice enthusiastically, his movements almost too forceful, but Senku simply smirked and let him work. He turned away, already calculating the next steps. If this worked, there were a few other things he'd need. Primarily, they required an initial test subject. And with what Senku suspected…
>
> *Let the brute handle this. I'll do the mental heavy lifting. May the gods curse me.*

Gen leaned slightly to the side, raising a hand to shield his lips from the others. "What did you do this time, Senku-chan?"

The scientist actually hesitated, looking… put off. A little guilty. And that told Gen everything he needed to know. They had joked about committing wildly unethical acts before—laughed about the things that would surely send them to hell together. But not once had Senku worn *that* look. It wasn't just hesitation; it was the kind of pause that came when someone had brushed up against a line they weren't sure they should have crossed. A moment where even Senku, brilliant and unshakable...

"Senku?" Gen prompted again, this time with a trace of something real in his voice. Concern.

Senku must have noticed—he always did. Gen caught the faint twitch of a finger, a tiny tell that most people would miss. But instead of answering, Senku turned away, waving the question off.

"If it's important, I'm sure it'll show up."

Avoidant.

Gen's mind supplied the word immediately. He could push—could force an answer if he wanted to—

Better not.

Not yet.

"It would've been a crime to make liquor without a license in our time."

Inside the treehouse, bathed in bright afternoon light, the two boys sat on the floor, carefully filtering the deep red liquid through a woven sieve. Senku watched as the last drops passed through, nodding in satisfaction. "Three weeks. That should about do it."

"But, Senku…" Taiju hesitated as he finished straining the wine.

Senku was already holding a clay cup, shaped roughly like a wine glass, ready to test their work.

"This would still count as underage drinking, though," Taiju pointed out, his uncertainty clear.

Senku simply cackled. "Not a problem! We're well over 3,700 years old."

Sometimes, I have to remember that Taiju has different experiences than me… Probably for the best. Those guys in Africa would eat him alive if he couldn't stomach wine. They were the kind of scientists who could down a glass of questionable homemade alcohol after a 20-hour shift in the field, laugh about the mortality rate of the viruses they studied, and still wake up the next day ready to poke at the next deadly thing. No rules, no hesitation—just a bunch of reckless, brilliant minds operating on the fringes of disaster. If Taiju had been there, he would've been horrified. I, on the other hand, might've picked up a few bad habits.

"It's also common in the business world to share a cup of wine every now and then. Best way to seal a deal!" Ryusui interjected with a grin.

"Still, it's hard to picture Senku-chan as the type of bad boy who'd be sneaking in underage drinking!" Gen snickered. "I always figured he'd be too wrapped up in whatever experiment he was working on—wouldn't even leave the lab for that kind of thing."

"...I was dragged," Senku admitted.

Ukyo chuckled as the lighter mood settled over the group. "Somehow, I don't think any of us are surprised by that."

Realization dawned on Taiju's face before he burst into laughter. "Oh, you're right!" he exclaimed, grabbing the pot he had just sieved the wine into. Without hesitation, both he and Senku took a drink.

Taiju barely got the liquid down before he choked, immediately spitting it back out with a loud sputter. He doubled over, hacking and gasping for air as if he'd just been poisoned.

"Was it actually *that* bad?" Ryusui asked, grinning as the laughter died down, still amused by Taiju's reaction.

"Yes," Senku said flatly, already knowing the inevitable explanation was coming.

Senku, meanwhile, had a far milder reaction. He simply raised an eyebrow. "Better than I thought it'd be… though about ten billion times worse than anything that was on the market."

Not our sweet, cultivated grapes anymore. Nature really does reclaim everything.

Taiju eyed the jar he had just drunk from, still processing. "So we can make wine this easily? Just with grapes…?"

"Steadily, step by step… That's how science works," Senku explained, setting his cup down before stretching slightly. Then, with a glance out of the corner of his eye, he added, "This next part is going to be a little more tedious…"

"Well, of *course* it is!" Gen exclaimed, his voice a strange mix of sarcasm and mock despair, all while keeping a bright, cheerful smile. "Our dear Senku-chan *does* love dishing out tedious work!"

Senku cracked his neck with a satisfied grin. "An introduction to distilling wine—how to make brandy. It's class time, Taiju."

The two headed outside, chatting as they walked. Senku had already prepared the next steps while Taiju had been busy gathering and stomping their grapes into shape.

"Distilling, huh?" Taiju mused as he leapt down from the treehouse in a single bound. "No idea what that means!"

Senku climbed down using the poles and wooden ladder, shaking his head. "I *knew* you'd say that. That's why class is in session. Heat it, cool it, drip it—that concentrates the alcohol. Then we're in the realm of real adult drinking." He smirked. "Just don't go telling the police."

"Were you *dragged* into making brandy too, Senku?" Ukyo asked. It was sometimes hard to tell with him—being one of the quieter, more serious members—but there was no mistaking the slight laugh in his voice.

Gen couldn't help but stifle his own grin at the rare lighthearted teasing from the man.

"No," Senku said, stretching slightly. "But I *did* buy myself rather extravagant research freedom by making people brandy. Well, negotiation isn't exactly my strength, but I once read about the art of manipulation in a book."

As he finished, he glanced toward Gen.

The Mentalist felt an unexpected heat rush to his face. *Ahhh… He actually read my books. He still remembers them word for word because of his eidetic memory. I seem to be embarrassed about that. How odd… No, it makes sense. I have a high opinion of his intelligence, so knowing he has some opinion on my book would naturally make me a little… leery. Not that any of this matters in the Stone Age.*

On top of a makeshift stone stove, heated by a crackling fire, sat a massive, closed-off clay jug with a thin bamboo pipe jutting out at an angle. It was roughly gourd-shaped and nearly as tall as Taiju.

"Don't worry," Senku assured them, gesturing toward the clay monstrosity with a wicked grin full of anticipation. "People in the Mesopotamian Civilization were doing this with clay pots back in 3000 BC."

For the first time in months, things were finally going their way. Once science got the ball rolling, it built momentum.

"There's *nothing* science can't do if you try!"

A small crack ran along the side of the jug.

"This is exhilarating—!"

The words had barely left his mouth before wine shot through the crack. In the next instant, the entire structure collapsed in on itself. Taiju was splashed slightly. Senku, on the other hand, was absolutely drenched, his entire front soaked in deep reddish-purple.

"Great comedic timing, Senku-chan!" Gen declared, grinning as laughter erupted around them at the look on their head scientist's face.

"Laugh it up, Mentalist," Senku shot back, his wicked grin barely masking the more genuine amusement underneath. "Because when I start handing out your workload again… well, just remember what I said earlier about my memory."

Evil~! Gen internally pouted but wisely toned down his laughter.

Dripping in wine, Senku grinned.

Two steps forward, only one step back—I'll take it. He mentally ran through the failure, already recalculating. *I forgot to account for the sheer amount of steam buildup… and that even a small crack would expand under pressure.* A simple miscalculation, but one easily corrected.

This was just another experiment. Another lesson. And next time, the jug would hold.

"So *that's* how it happened," Chrome murmured, filing the reaction away in his mind. Senku watched as he worked through the problem, sorting information like puzzle pieces. It was always interesting to see the way Chrome's brain tackled new concepts—instinctive, curious, and relentless.

"What it would be like to peek inside his brain."

Senku glanced to the side toward Gen.

For once, it didn’t seem like Gen had meant to say that out loud—a rare slip-up from the Mentalist. Understandable, though. Senku had just been thinking much the same himself.

> Night had fallen, and Senku’s soaked clothes hung dripping on a line near the fire, steam rising faintly as they dried.
>
> Taiju, seated nearby, grinned sheepishly as he held out something to eat, mushrooms roasting over the flames. Senku, however, was too focused to acknowledge him. Kneeling on the ground, he worked on the base of a new clay jug, his upper body streaked with drying clay. His only clothing—wine-stained, vaguely boxy undergarments—clung to him as he shaped the clay with steady, precise hands, already preparing for round two.

Senku could *feel* sharp eyes boring into him, flicking between his current self and the one on the TV screen. Looking at Gen right now would be a mistake. *A dangerous one.* He knew it without a doubt.

"Aren't you actually *too* skinny on the TV, Senku-chan?" Gen finally mused aloud, his voice light but carrying an unmistakable edge.

Damned psychologist. Senku exhaled slowly, but he couldn’t help but be impressed. Gen really did notice *everything.*

"One person surviving alone is hard," Senku replied simply.

He wondered if those words rang as hollow to them as they did to him. For the first few months after waking up, his body had been eating itself alive, his caloric intake *nowhere near* enough to keep up with the demands of survival. The constant exhaustion, the near-constant ache of an empty stomach—it had nearly killed him. It hadn’t been until Taiju finally arrived that things had started to stabilize, that he had begun clawing his way back from the edge.

Even then, he hadn’t fully recovered.

Not yet.

The body consumed itself when it had no other choice, and the damage from those months still lingered. Whether time would ever be enough to reverse it completely…

That was something only time itself could answer.

Day dawned. Time blurred.

Senku entered the laboratory, propping the door flap open with a branch before carrying a jug outside. He handed it off to Taiju, giving quick instructions. In front of the lab, he knelt, shaping the new distiller jug with practiced precision. Taiju returned soon after, basket full, and they roasted mushrooms and small pieces of meat. They ate together, but Senku barely paused in his work, hands busy molding a clay bowl even as he chewed.

Taiju left again with his empty basket, and Senku remained, methodically refining the bowl's shape. Occasionally, he glanced at the distiller jug, checking for any imperfections. *Another fracture would waste too much time.*

Evening fell. Senku sat waiting in front of the bamboo nozzle, watching as a jar was positioned beneath it. Nearby, Taiju chopped wood, his steady rhythm filling the quiet.

Time passed.

Taiju leaned over Yuzuriha's statue, carefully brushing the snow off her shoulders. Once satisfied, he smiled and lifted a hand to his chin—only to freeze in surprise.

Both boys stood at the beach, Senku digging through the snow until he unearthed something. With a smirk, he picked up a clamshell and mimicked plucking hairs from his chin before handing another to Taiju.

Without hesitation, Taiju got to work, mercilessly yanking out every last strand until his chin was as bare as a plucked chicken.

The results were immediate. The lower half of his face flared an angry red.

Senku collapsed onto the ground, cackling, pointing at him between bouts of laughter, hands slapping against the earth in sheer amusement.

Rare, Gen mused, even as laughter filled the room, echoing alongside the image on the screen.

Moments like this—where Senku *really* laughed, unrestrained and carefree—were becoming fewer and farther between. Senku usually kept his amusement to himself, his laughter tempered, controlled. Gen had to wonder if that was because he was *too* aware of the weight on his shoulders, of the world he was trying to rebuild piece by piece.

Maybe that was why, whenever Senku *did* let go, Gen couldn't help but take notice.

> The snow in the forest thinned, retreating with the changing season. Finally, beneath a cloudless blue sky, a field burst into bloom—flowers stretching toward the sunlight, butterflies drifting lazily through the air. Inside the laboratory, Taiju and Senku poured a yellowish liquid from separate clay beakers over several stone swallows. Nothing happened. The petrified birds remained unchanged, their rigid forms untouched by the fluid.
>
> Taiju tensed, his gaze fixed on the unmoving statues. Senku, jaw tight, kicked a jar out of the doorway, sending it tumbling across the ground, *It's slower than I wanted… but still faster than I expected. And yet… it's frustrating.*

"So even *Senku* has these kinds of thoughts," Chrome said, almost teasing.

Senku, however, was unbothered. "Everyone here is human. It's part of the human experience to get frustrated when things don't go your way. What matters is how you use that frustration. If you channel it into more science, then you get *real* determination—the kind that makes you try everything again and again."

For a moment, the room felt heavier, everyone looking at Senku as if he had just handed them the meaning of life in a one-minute speech.

And then—

"There it is, one of those *rare* motivational speeches," Gen chimed in, effortlessly breaking the spell. *Tsukasa and Senku both have this natural ability to command attention when they speak. It's terrifying. I wonder if Senku even realizes it? Either way, I'll keep breaking the atmosphere. The last thing we need is people dwelling too long on that weird, inspired feeling. Give it a few more minutes, and it'll start looking like a cult in here.*

Senku looked up, then cast a glance back inside the laboratory. There, lying in a small puddle of fluid, was a single unpetrified feather—its tip still encased in stone. He stared at it, unblinking.

Gotcha. A slow, unholy grin spread across his face.

"That look usually spells trouble," Kohaku noted with a smile, "... It's usually a good kind, though."

The music faded, and time resumed its natural flow.

The two teenagers stepped out of the laboratory, Senku kneeling to place a stone swallow gently onto the grass. Without hesitation, he poured the yellowish liquid over it, the golden sheen seeping into the cracks.

"Let me teach you something, big oaf," Senku said, standing beside Taiju as they watched intently. "There's nothing science can't explain."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then—a faint sound. A barely perceptible *crack.*

"All you need to do is look for the rules behind everything."

Taiju's eyes widened. More cracks.

"Science is just the name for the steady, pain-in-the-ass effort that goes into finding those rules and using them for humanity's gain."

A fragment of stone splintered away.

And behind it—

A living eye.

Senku exhaled, his grin breaking wide with exhilaration.

Finally—

"Success looks *good* on you, Senku-chan~," Gen whispered, voice low and teasing.

Senku registered the words a second too late. His eyes flicked wide in brief surprise as he turned to look at Gen—an unguarded moment, fleeting but unmistakable. Then, just as

quickly, he recovered, settling back into something more neutral. More expected. A little *too* normal, almost forced in its casualness, "Thanks, Mentalist," he replied evenly. "You're not too bad yourself."

Gen blinked. *Huh. Usually, he shuts down talk like that immediately—brushes it off with some sharp remark or outright dismissal.*

His mind drifted back to the ramen cart, to that moment when someone had tried flirting with Senku before. The reaction had been immediate, almost scathing, if not for the blunt factor Senku had put into the rejection and offer to use the woman as cheap labour.

> A spiderweb of cracks spread through the stone shell—thin at first, then deepening—until finally, the bird broke free. With a burst of movement, it shook off the last remnants of its petrified prison, chirping loudly as it took to the air. Both boys watched, transfixed, as the swallow fluttered in tight circles, its song carrying through the open sky.
>
> "WHOOOOOOOOAAAAH!!!"
>
> Taiju's voice rang out, thick with emotion. His fists clenched, his eyes shimmered with unshed tears as he stared after the bird, watching it soar higher and higher before vanishing into the distance. Senku exhaled and dropped onto their unused stone stove, the weight of the moment finally settling on him. His bangs fell over his eyes, but his smile—exhausted yet triumphant—remained.
>
> "One year since I started experimenting…" he murmured. "Didn't take as long as I thought."
>
> *It could have taken years. Thousands of tries. By that measure…*
>
> He let the thought trail off. It didn't matter anymore.
>
> Because science had won.

"Years..." Ukyo murmured, his voice thoughtful. It was almost impossible to picture—Senku, alone, chipping away at the mystery for *years*, with nothing but trial and error to guide him.

And yet, even if it *had* taken that long, not a single soul in the room doubted that he would have done it.

They knew him too well for that.

He leaned back, his sweat-covered face tilted toward the sky, breath steadying as the weight of the moment settled over him.

"It's a slow but steady effort."

Tired red eyes gleamed, determination burning beneath the exhaustion. It was the kind of exhaustion that ran deep, past muscle fatigue and into something bone-deep, the kind that came from spending six months alone, speaking only to himself, running this experiment over and over with no guarantee of success. Another six months had passed with just Taiju—a relief, but still a far cry from the type of human contact that humans needed.

"I'm going to beat fantasy with science."

The screen cut to black, but not before his grin—sharp, unshaken—flashed one last time.

"This is exhilarating."

15 minutes before playback starts.

"Well, *that* was certainly interesting," Gen announced into the silence left by their leader's declaration. He stretched lazily, but his eyes gleamed with amusement. "Although, you know, Senku-chan… that was rather dramatic. You have a flair for that, don't you?"

"Don't throw stones in your glass house, *Mentalist*."

"—The way you styled your hair upon revival to make your scars look *extra* badass stands out—"

Senku shot Gen a look of mild distaste. It didn't last long—he *could* admit there was some humor in it—but he still forced himself to roll his eyes as Gen continued, relentless as ever.

"—That one time you kicked the pot over, *so* many theatrics~!"

Chapter End Notes

I think I didn't realize how hard doing reaction fics is. God bless people who have written epic long versions of them because jesus.

Chapter 5: Interlude One - Gen's Petrification

There wasn't much to be done in fifteen minutes, Senku mused as they sat around, waiting for the TV to restart itself. Eventually, once things got more interesting, these breaks would probably evolve into discussions—maybe even arguments. But for now, they were just *snack breaks*.

"I wish it would just restart already~!" Gen whined beside him, staring at the screen with mild impatience.

Senku arched a brow. "Are you *enjoying* this, Mentalist?"

Gen flashed him a sharp, dark smile. "It's *somewhat* intriguing to see everyone's thoughts laid bare—all the better to manipulate people with in the future~!"

Senku didn't buy it. Not for one second.

Before he could retort, the TV flickered back to life.

> "What… is this?" Gen thought to himself, his voice swallowed by the endless darkness around him. It was vast. Empty. A space that felt like... *absolutely nothing*—no sound, no light, no sense of time. Just an abyss stretching in all directions. For once, his sharp mind had no immediate answers.

Senku immediately turned his head toward the Mentalist, scanning him for any sign of discomfort. He found none—not a single trace—but *this* was Gen. If he *was* in pain, he wouldn't show it. Not unless he wanted to.

"We can decide not to watch, Mentalist," Senku murmured, throwing Gen's own words back at him.

For a moment, Gen held his usual easy expression, but then—just barely—there was a slight crinkle at the corner of his eyes. A crack in the façade.

"If there had been *any* other way, you would have taken it, right, Senku-chan?"

"Right."

But Senku's voice, usually steady in its certainty, came out just a little softer than usual.

> There had been a show—a good one, too. Of course, it was always easy for Gen to win over a crowd. But this one had been particularly enthusiastic, the kind of audience that practically threw their pocket money at him for a ticket. Everything had been going *perfectly.* The energy in the room had been electric, every laugh, every gasp, every round of applause feeding into his performance like fuel to a fire. He had them in the palm of his hand, and there was no greater thrill than knowing he could guide their emotions with just a flick of his wrist and the right words.
>
> And then—a bright green light.
>
> It swallowed everything.
>
> There was no body, no weight, no sense of movement. Even if Gen *wanted* to move, he couldn't. There was no connection—just *mind*, floating in an endless, formless space.
>
> It was fascinating.
>
> It was terrifying.
>
> He wanted it to be over. *Now.* He hoped—*prayed*—that this was just a dream.
>
> *"It's not a dream, though, is it~?"* Gen sang to himself, trying for his usual playful lilt, but even in his own mind, his voice wavered—thin, panicked.

"I don't think I've ever heard Gen sound so scared," Kohaku murmured, her sharp gaze softening as she looked at the two-toned-haired man.

Ukyo considered it for a moment before speaking. "It's hard to hide your own feelings from *yourself*," he said thoughtfully. "When we talk to Gen, he's as guarded as ever—able to mask

his emotions whenever he wants. But in a moment like that? There's no filter. No performance."

Gen chuckled, light and easy, effortlessly steering the conversation away. "Anyone would be scared in that situation, so it's really not that abnormal."

The way he dismissed it so smoothly only made it more obvious.

"What… could have happened—"

"Unconscious? But if I were, I should be able to wake—"

"Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up—"

"Impossible. Can't wake up. Not asleep. Am I—"

"No… I don't feel dead. I know I'm not. I can't explain it, but—"

"We all had similar thoughts. I tried to tell myself I needed to *buy* my way into waking up!" Ryusui declared, his usual confidence in full force, clearly aiming to lighten the mood.

It didn't really work.

A few chuckles, maybe, but the heaviness in the room lingered.

A stream of consciousness continued for—well, Gen had no idea how long. Time didn't exist here. His panicked thoughts had spiraled endlessly, looping over themselves, desperate and searching. And then— They started to fade. Even in his own mind, the sound of his thoughts grew distant, slipping further and further away, as if something—*someone*—was pulling them from him, unraveling him thread by thread.

And—

"NO!"

The word tore through the void, sharp and raw, the only thing that still felt *real*.

Senku blinked in surprise at the sudden outburst.

Gen had never actually talked about his time *inside* the petrification, and Senku had been curious. Of course, he'd theorized, but getting to *see* it—getting even a fragmented glimpse into what had gone through Gen's mind during those endless moments—was something else entirely. In a strange way, it felt like a *bonding* moment, an unfiltered peek into an experience few could truly understand. It was fascinating, seeing how differently everyone processed it.

But something about it *bothered* him.

Gen had been too *calm*. Too composed, too quick to wave it all off, even now.

Senku wished he didn't seem so *unnaturally* relaxed about the whole thing.

Gen jerked himself back to attention.

What happens if I actually let my thoughts fade? What if that's the only thing keeping me alive? A cold realization settled over him. He had no proof that his consciousness alone was sustaining him, but he wasn't about to risk testing the theory. *What I wouldn't do for an audiobook right now.* He forced himself to focus, to grasp onto something solid—anything that could anchor him. *I have to keep my thoughts concentrated. If I let myself drift into some endless stream of consciousness, I'll dull. Lose track. Lose myself.*

That meant structure. Awareness.

Full focus. Something to measure time. Something—

He sharpened his thoughts, *forced* his brain to work in ways it wasn't meant to. The human mind thrived on input, constantly digesting information, responding, reacting. It wasn't *built* for this—for isolation in a void where nothing *existed* except itself.

"His way of doing it is so different from Senku," Chrome mused aloud, turning to face Gen with open curiosity. "Did you also stay awake the whole time?"

"Oh no, no, no, no," Gen hastily waved his hands, as if trying to physically swat the idea away. "I'm *not* some kind of crazy person like those two."

Ukyo hummed in thought, arms crossed, gaze sharp. "I think you *are*, though. Most of us couldn't stop ourselves from sliding into the dark."

His tone wasn't accusing—just observant. And somehow, that made it worse.

Senku leaned forward slightly, his red eyes locked onto Gen with renewed interest.

Fascinating.

Gen's experience—*his method of survival*—was fundamentally different. Most people had either fallen into unconsciousness or struggled against the inevitable, like Taiju, holding onto a single thought for millennia. But Gen… *had adapted.* He had *controlled* his own perception, deliberately keeping his thoughts moving so he wouldn't fade. Was it intelligence? The sheer force of an active, manipulative mind refusing to be still?

Because now, he *really* wanted to know.

> "We shall simply recite something memorable, get a rough estimate of how long it takes to recite it, and keep count of how many times… Yes, that should work."
>
> Gen let out a small, breathless laugh, the absurdity of it all creeping in. *The book I know best… Yes. A little egotistical, even for me, but it seems the book I know best is—*
>
> *my own book~!*
>
> He could almost hear his own voice narrating it in that theatrical tone he used to captivate crowds. Every line, every flourish, every carefully crafted phrase—burned into his memory from years of performance, of selling his own words like gospel.
>
> *How's that for irony?*
>
> If he had to be alone in the void for who-knew-how-long, at least he had himself for entertainment.

"Your own book, *Mentalist*? Quite the ego on you," Senku deadpanned, fully aware that Gen would take it exactly as intended—a joke at his expense.

And yet, even as the words left his mouth, Senku couldn't quite look away. The joke couldn't mask the *fascination* curling in his mind, the way his thoughts kept circling back to the sheer *mechanics* of it. Gen had turned his own words into a timekeeping device, into a *lifeline*, using his memory and awareness in a way no other than Senku had. It wasn't just survival—it was adaptation at a level that *intrigued* him, in the way only the rarest puzzles did. Senku found himself staring, mind turning over the implications, already theorizing.

Kind of genius, though, he admitted, his voice losing some of its usual sharp edge. *Only he would come up with something so absurd and make it work.*

And so, Gen repeated the words he knew by heart.

Repeated them until they dulled at the edges, the once-dramatic phrases flattening into monotony.

Then he repeated them again.

Again.

Again.

Until his own voice—his *own mind*—became unbearable.

Until the words blurred together, lost all meaning.

Until he *couldn't* anymore.

"How many times now…?"

He forced himself to tally it up, his thoughts sluggish, stretched thin.

"66,666 times. Each time takes something like… ten hours, and so… over 70 years, huh? Right."

The number sat heavy in his mind.

Too big. Too abstract. It didn't *feel* real, even though he *knew* it was.

"Yep, there's *definitely* another member of the ‘crazy people who stayed awake’ club," Ukyo remarked, his usual even tone laced with something between disbelief and reluctant admiration.

"Over *seventy years*… and you just repeated your own book in your head the *entire* time?"

It sounded impossible. *Should* have been impossible.

Even his internal thoughts *sounded* exhausted. There was really…

"There’s no point. If something was going to happen, it likely would have happened by now. What’s the worst that could happen if I just…"

He hesitated. The thought was *dangerous.* But so was this. The constant recitation, the *torture* of keeping himself tethered, the unrelenting weight of his own awareness pressing down on him—*he* was the one prolonging it.

"I’m torturing myself by not allowing the fade."

And so, he let it take him.

The last of his thoughts unraveled into nothingness.

Playback Starts In 1 Hour.

Senku couldn’t speak.

The others clearly felt the same.

It was a *choice*. A *conscious* decision. Gen had spent seventy years *fighting*, forcing himself to stay aware, *counting* his way through an eternity of nothingness—only to finally decide he couldn’t anymore. To *let go.* Technically, that was… *essentially…* Senku swallowed hard, his mind forcing itself through the thought. *For all the Mentalist knew, that was the same as committing suicide.*

The weight of it settled over the room, unspoken but crushing. From the way the others sat frozen, staring at the screen with varying shades of horror, Senku knew he wasn’t the only one thinking it. Kohaku was the one to *move*. With a rare lack of hesitation, she got up, stormed over, and wrapped Gen in a *fierce* embrace, ignoring his immediate flinch and the way he instinctively tried to pull away.

"Shut up and take my hug, you *idiot*!" she snapped, her voice half-scolding, half-shaken.

Gen stilled. His usual easy deflections stalled on his tongue.

For once, he had nothing to say.

Chapter 6: Episode 2 Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took quite some time before Kohaku finally released Gen from her monster of a hug. Senku watched as the Mentalist went from uncomfortable stiffness to something closer to reluctant acceptance, until, at last, he just *gave in*.

That gave Senku time to *really think*.

It wasn't that he believed he was the *only* one capable of keeping track of time under petrification—*technically*, anyone could have done it with enough determination. But even *he* hadn't expected Gen to be the type to attempt it. Before this, he had already considered the Mentalist incredibly intelligent, emotionally and otherwise, *indispensable* as one of the Kingdom of Science's key players. Gen never let anything get to him, wore his easygoing smirk like armor, and was even willing to sink to moral lows *alongside Senku* when the situation called for it.

But Gen had *counted* the time.

For *seventy years*.

And then he had chosen to *stop*. *That*—that part stuck with Senku more than anything else. Maybe it was worth having a conversation about. Not because Senku was particularly inclined to dig into his own experiences—he *preferred* to leave things in the past. But the fact that Gen had *given up* partway through the count, had made the conscious decision to *let himself go*, made Senku want to check in. Even if it meant opening himself up a little.

Next break, Senku thought to himself. Maybe it was just to set a time so he wouldn't let the thought drift away. Or maybe… maybe it was to let the rest of the Kingdom of Science keep offering Gen their quiet reassurances, their casual but earnest concern, the kind that the Mentalist seemed to be *genuinely enjoying*—despite his protests.

Ryusui had an arm slung over Gen's shoulders, talking about how *impressed* he was and how he would be keeping Gen in his employ. Ukyo, ever perceptive, quietly offered—if Senku was reading his lips right—to be there if Gen wanted to talk. Taiju, ever the force of warmth, gave him a hearty slap on the back, grinning wide as always.

Next break, Senku reaffirmed. If *everyone else* could manage something, so could he.

It was also… *mentally impressive.* Senku admitted that to himself as the clock on the playback hit zero. A small warmth spread in his chest at the thought, quiet but present. Then —

A tremor.

Just the faintest shake in his hand, too small for anyone else to notice.

Senku had no idea *why* it happened.

As the group settled back into their seats, more than a few last glances were sent Gen's way, lingering touches of concern before they returned their attention to the screen.

> Senku was still basking in their success at cracking the first mystery of the petrification phenomenon. It felt *good*—the sharp, satisfying kind of accomplishment that settled deep in his chest. A victory *earned*, not given. It was clean, logical, and undeniable. And yes, maybe it was tinged with a bit of ego, but could anyone really blame him?

"Senku-chan looks a little smug here~!" Gen announced gleefully, his voice light and teasing, clearly trying to shake off the last traces of their previous discussion.

"He *should*!" Ryusui laughed, jumping in effortlessly—whether because he enjoyed the conversation or because he *enjoyed* playing into Gen's theatrics was anyone's guess. "If *I* had discovered the cure for petrification, I'd be smug too! *And* rich!"

"Although, I’m not sure—Senku, how do you actually feel about using science for profit?" Ukyo asked, his voice quieter but no less pointed.

Senku twitched, eyes flicking between the moving playback and his desire to answer. He didn’t want to miss anything. Then again… he didn’t *have* to, did he? This was a *product of time travel*. Which meant, *if* he improved upon the design by remembering to add something —like, for example, a function where playback automatically *paused* when they were in conversation—

The screen abruptly froze.

All eyes snapped toward it in confusion.

Senku’s grin widened. "I had a thought, so I made it happen."

"Senku-chan?" Gen prompted, raising an eyebrow.

"It sucks that we might miss something vital just because it keeps playing while we talk, so I fixed it. Or, *future me* fixed it," Senku explained smoothly before turning toward Ukyo. "As for science and profit? *Not ideal.* Science should be used to *better* lives, to create a net positive for *everyone.* But for science to function as a societal system, there *has* to be enough profit for people to *live* while they study. Ideally, it’s a delicate balance."

Ukyo shook his head, a soft look in his eyes. "Not really possible in the old world, was it?"

Money makes the world go round, Gen thought to himself, a touch of quiet disappointment lacing the realization. The system had always been flawed, but he had made use of it. *Still* made use of it. And honestly? So did—

"It’s an ideal," Senku admitted, cutting through Gen’s thoughts as he considered the problem more deeply. "But how *practical* is it? When it comes down to it, there’s something *satisfying* about *having* wealth, *gathering* it. It fulfills something human. Even with a bartering system, wealth still gets distributed unevenly. There’s no getting around it. Even now." He exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "Not that I *like* that fact, but…" A wry grin tugged at his lips. "It *is* useful. You *saw* how quickly me and the Mentalist started stockpiling our own wealth the moment Ryusui introduced money back into the equation. We don’t *need* it, but that doesn’t mean we’re not gonna take advantage of it."

Gen pressed his hands together, eyes glinting with amusement. "So Senku-chan *does* like having money~! I knew it! All those minerals and resources we kept 'negotiating' for were just *science taxes* in disguise!"

Senku rolled his eyes but didn’t deny it. "If people are *going* to put value on something, might as well use that to grease the wheels of progress. Science doesn’t *need* money, but it sure as hell *runs* faster when people think they’re getting a return on investment."

Ryusui laughed, clearly delighted. "Spoken like a true businessman!"

Ukyo tilted his head, studying Senku curiously. "So then, what *would* the perfect system look like to you? If profit isn’t ideal, but science *needs* incentive, where’s the balance?"

Senku crossed his arms, gaze thoughtful. "Tch. If I had a perfect answer for *that*, we wouldn’t have spent centuries getting it wrong. The best-case scenario? Everyone benefits from scientific advancement, but there’s still *some* system in place that rewards innovation and effort. *Something* that doesn’t just funnel resources into the hands of the powerful."

"A *controlled* free market?" Gen mused, tapping his chin. "Now *that’s* a concept that would get economists foaming at the mouth~."

"More like *a pain-in-the-ass equation*," Senku corrected. "Too many variables. Too many ways for human greed to screw it all up."

"And yet," Ryusui grinned, "you're still gonna play the game when it benefits you, aren't you?"

Senku smirked. "Of course. I *love* winning."

Kohaku gave a slow, deliberate nod—the way she did when she was *genuinely* considering something. "In the village, the elders and leaders get the most respect—and the most food offerings. Is that similar to what you're talking about?"

Senku pointed at her. "Ten billion points for Kohaku!"

"I *get it*!" Taiju suddenly exclaimed, his enthusiasm completely undampened by the amused looks thrown his way.

Still, no one dismissed him. Because, despite everything, they *all* turned back toward the screen, thinking it over.

Taiju stepped forward and asked, "So, Senku, who should we revive first?"

Ryusui let out a booming chuckle and turned toward Taiju with a knowing grin. "I'd bet *all* my money that you were thinking of *her* when you said that!"

Senku scoffed, barely suppressing an eye-roll. "That'd be a fool's bet. She's *all* that oaf thinks about."

"Huh?" Senku shrugged, making a flippant gesture. "We're going to wake *everyone* up eventually anyway. What does it matter who we start with?"

"Senku-chan…" Gen uttered, staring at him, *aghast* at the sheer lack of care in his tone. *No wonder they ended up reviving Tsukasa and getting into that whole mess.*

I know what you're getting at, big oaf, Senku thought, exhaling sharply as he glanced at Taiju.

"I think it's *really* bad how well you guys know each other," Chrome suddenly stated, though there was no real bite to it—just something thoughtful, almost *wistful*, in his tone. A softness in his eyes.

To have a friend like that… I guess… I do now? Chrome thought back to the way things had always been—how he had spent so much time alone, collecting strange things, pushing the limits of what he understood, doing everything he could to help Ruri in his own way. He hadn't been *excluded* from the village, but there had always been a distance. His world had been one of solo exploration, of tinkering in solitude.

And yet… That collection of his, those small obsessions and discoveries, had led him *here*. To the Kingdom of Science. To *them.*

Chrome smiled, full of determination.

He didn't notice the soft look Senku sent him.

But Gen did.

The Mentalist hid his grin behind his sleeve, his eyes glinting with amusement.

Senku-chan really is soft.

He snickered, "Though it would really suck if we happened to wake up some kind of murderer first."

"Ehe… There's no way…" Gen muttered under his breath, staring at Senku with wide eyes. Then, shaking his head as if to rid himself of the thought, he forced a grin. "What are the chances of you saying that and having it *actually* happen?"

"Ten billion to one," Senku announced confidently, flashing the Mentalist a grin. "Although, considering it actually ended up being okay, I'd say the odds were even worse."

Taiju glanced down, troubled, "I see."

"You *better* have let him revive her!" Kohaku declared, raising a fist in warning.

Senku immediately threw his hands up in mock defense. "Just *wait*, damn gorilla."

Fangirls in the Stone Age. We've created a monster. Senku felt a bead of sweat slide down his neck as a shiver ran through him. *Maybe this is finally what'll send me to hell.*

Senku looked at him, then got to his feet with an air of exaggerated disinterest.

"I don't particularly *feel* like deciding who goes first…" he drawled, stretching lazily before turning to Taiju with a smirk. Then, with a dramatic point, he declared, "Taiju, *you* choose!"

"Now *that's* more like it!" Kohaku exclaimed with a grin.

Gen shrugged, waving a hand lazily. "I *can't* believe you didn't see that coming. It's *very* in character for Senku-chan."

You deserve it, after all the hard work you've done to get us here… And for me… The only one I would revive, other than Taiju or Yuzuriha… Senku let the thought drift, his gaze lifting toward the vast, starry night sky.

"Ah... so *that's* how it is…" Kohaku murmured, casting a sad glance toward Senku. He looked unaffected—completely unfazed, as if listening to those thoughts had no impact on him at all. *He always looks so strong, but even he thinks about things like this…*

Gen's gaze flicked toward their leader as well, quiet and calculating. *I wonder what he was thinking… when he heard his father's recording…*

If Senku *felt* their gazes, he gave no indication whatsoever.

Taiju looked stunned for a moment, his eyes wide with unspoken emotion. Then, as if grounding himself, he met Senku's smirk with a determined smile.

"Thanks, Senku."

His mind immediately conjured the image of Yuzuriha's statue, standing silently beneath the camphor tree, untouched by time.

"Of course, my answer is obvious…"

"Extremely obvious. *Painfully* obvious. *Plainly* obvious. *Clearly* obvious," Gen whispered under his breath, leaning slightly toward Senku. "I'm trying to find more words to describe just *how* obvious it was, but it's hard to come up with anything *fitting* because of how *unbelievably* obvious it was."

Senku snorted, then broke into full-on snickers at the comment, his shoulders shaking with amusement. When his laughter finally died down, he turned to Gen with a *toothy* grin, still riding the lingering amusement. Gen immediately looked away, but the image burned itself into his mind. Senku-chan, laughing freely—his ears tinged slightly pink, his red eyes sparkling with the remnants of laughter. And *Gen* had put that look on him.

Senku-chan really is dangerous.

Senku and Taiju stepped up to the camphor tree, where Yuzuriha had stood frozen in time for so long. The towering branches stretched above them, swaying gently in the breeze, but their focus remained on the unmoving figure before them. In Senku's hand was a small jar, filled with the precious revival fluid. It had taken *time* to gather enough

—especially with the necessary safety experiments beforehand. He wasn't about to risk anything on guesswork.

Taiju exhaled, his voice steady but thick with emotion.

"The time has finally come…"

"I'm sure you were *super* happy, right, Taiju?" Chrome asked, grinning at his companion.

Taiju nodded, but there was some *hesitation* in his expression.

Chrome's smile faltered as he caught it. "*Wait*—you *weren't* completely happy?" he asked, shocked at the uncharacteristic uncertainty in their usually *indestructible* stamina beast.

Taiju glanced toward Senku, his expression practically pleading for help.

Senku sighed, shaking his head. "You really are something, big oaf." Then, turning to Chrome, he explained, "If I had to guess, what he's *actually* getting at is that he was *scared.* Yuzuriha would be the *first* person we tried to revive—who the hell knew if it would *work*?"

Chrome blinked, his brows furrowing as he considered that. "...That makes sense."

Then he turned to Senku, fists eagerly clenched, "So if we use that water, the petrification will be undone, and she'll be revived, right?"

Senku met his gaze with absolute confidence, his answer firm and assured.

"Yes. She *should*."

Chrome watched as Senku's unwavering confidence *erased* any lingering doubt from Taiju's face—both in the present and on the screen. It wasn't surprising. Everyone *knew* Taiju trusted Senku. But watching it unfold like this, seeing it so raw and unshaken… The *amount* of trust Taiju had in him was almost *inhuman*.

In the background, the screen flickered to a vague image—Senku, kneeling, pouring the revival fluid onto something unidentifiable. The scene was grainy, indistinct, but the weight of it pressed into the room nonetheless. The *real* Senku's eyes darkened, a sharp, almost cruel glint flashing across his expression as he spoke.

"When I tried it on a statue that was already in pieces," he said, his voice disturbingly *gleeful*, "*It properly turned back into a corpse.*"

A chill ran through the group. The way Senku had said it—so matter-of-fact, almost *too* pleased with the discovery—sent a strange tension rippling through the air. Everyone stared at the TV in stunned, *disgusted* shock. It *made sense*. It needed to be tested. But *seeing* it, even for a brief moment… *knowing* Senku had actually done it and *never* said a word about it—it was unsettling.

Ukyo swallowed, his sharp gaze flicking between the room's inhabitants. Everyone seemed to be quietly processing what they had just learned. Even Senku himself didn't react, his expression eerily blank as he stared at the screen. Gen, unreadable as ever, sat deep in thought. He was undoubtedly running through the implications, breaking it down, theorizing, the way he always did.

The only one who didn't look shocked was Taiju.

His jaw was clenched, his brows furrowed—not in surprise, but in something closer to *frustration*.

"Senku!"

The scientist blinked, turning toward his friend, looking genuinely taken aback by the sudden anger in Taiju's voice. He didn't respond, just waited, brows raised, letting Taiju say what he needed to say.

"You… *need* to rely on all of us!"

Senku stared.

Then, after a beat, his lips quirked into a rueful grin. "Only *you* would look like you're gearing up for a long-winded scolding and come out with *that*." He exhaled, shaking his head. "*Don't* worry so much, big oaf. I've got plenty of people to rely on now."

Taiju met his gaze, searching for something, before giving a resolute nod and turning back toward the TV—signaling the *absolute* end of the subject.

Taiju bristled, yelling, "You are too blasphemous!"

That was true, but what could they really *say*? The manner in which Senku had presented the information…

Senku-chan was purposely framing it that way, Gen realized, his mind working through the layers of intention. *He wanted to make sure Taiju didn't feel any guilt over what he had to do.*

Gen shook his head, reluctantly impressed. "*You're* too much, Senku."

The scientist in question sighed, shooting Gen a look with the *tiniest* hint of irritation, though there was something begrudgingly amused underneath it, "Can't you *miss* something every once in a while, Mentalist?"

Gen smirked. "Shouldn't you sound *more* impressed with me, Senku-chan~?"

Senku didn't hesitate. "I'm already *fully* aware of the scope of your capabilities, Gen. This level of perception is *exactly* what I expect from you. You never disappoint, Mentalist."

Gen blinked.

Senku's been giving out a lot of compliments lately… It wasn't *much*—nothing flowery, nothing overly sentimental. Just simple acknowledgments, stated as if they were facts rather than praise. But that was *precisely* why they stood out. Senku wasn't the type to sugarcoat anything. If he thought something, he said it. And if he was *saying* these things, it meant he *genuinely* believed them. Which, somehow, made it *worse.*

Gen was used to flattery, to manipulation, to words meant to charm or sway. But this? This was just Senku, stating it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. As if *of course* Gen would never let him down. As if *of course* Senku fully expected his level of perception. As if it wasn't surprising at all. Gen's fingers twitched slightly, and for the *first time in a long time*, he felt the unfamiliar heat of *actual* flustered embarrassment creeping up his neck.

Senku-chan really is dangerous.

Senku snickered evilly, but his expression soon turned more subdued.

"Just in case, I put all the pieces back together first when I tested it…" *Taiju had put the pieces together, saving me some time.* "But as expected, you *can't* save someone if they're already dead."

His tone was neutral—clinical, even—but his gaze flickered with something unreadable. *There are too many unknowns. Variables like time, erosion, the loss of tiny fragments—maybe they matter, maybe they don't. But testing that by purposely breaking a statue? Even I'm not that cruel.*

"That girl… the first statue I found all the pieces of and put together…" Taiju said softly, his expression unreadable.

Senku felt a rare flicker of discomfort. That wasn't something he experienced often, *especially* when it came to Taiju. They knew each other *too* well—misunderstandings between them were practically nonexistent. But this? Senku had acted with cold logic, made a *calculated* choice. And for the first time, it felt like he had stepped too far outside the bounds of what Taiju could accept. It had never happened before. There had never been *circumstances* that could push that line between them. But here it was.

Taiju didn't speak. Didn't yell. *Didn't even look at him.*

He just clenched his fists tighter.

> "They made a valuable sacrifice to science. Send up a prayer or something." *It's basically the same as donating your body to science. It happened all the time in the old world— Don't think about it.*

I wonder if he struggles to make that distinction even now. After all, while it needed to be done, this wasn't someone who had volunteered herself to science. This was something ***Senku*** *had decided for them.* Gen turned the thought over in his mind, watching his friend carefully. He didn't feel particularly judgmental about it—Senku made choices that others *couldn't*, that others *wouldn't*. That was just who he was.

But still… *did* Senku ever think about it? Did he ever question whether he had the right?

Or did he just tell himself not to think about it and move on?

That won't actually help him heal from anything, Gen thought, his fingers absently tracing patterns against his sleeve.

He would know.

After all, *he was* a licensed psychologist.

> Taiju immediately straightened and slapped his hands together in prayer, "Right! Rest in peace, rest in peace, rest in peace, rest in peace…"

A moment of silence settled over them in quiet respect.

As leaders, we must always make logical decisions to better our group. Senku has probably dealt with this more than anyone here, Ryusui thought, feeling a stirring of approval. *That is*

precisely why I, as the greediest man, will have him under my employ by the time we get the world back on track!

Meanwhile, Senku rubbed the back of his neck, still feeling slightly out of sorts.

"Oaf?" he asked simply, knowing that with Taiju, that single word was enough.

Taiju met his gaze and gave him a steady nod. No hesitation. No resentment. Just trust.

Senku bowed his grinning head slightly.

Looks like everything will be okay, then.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, interlude of Senku's perspective

Next next chapter, episode 2 part 2

Chapter 7: Interlude Two - Senku's Experiments

The screen flickered abruptly, cutting into a dark night.

The transition was *sharper*, more aggressive than usual—enough to immediately catch Senku's attention. His brows furrowed slightly as he leaned forward, already analyzing the shift.

Something about this felt *different.*

> A half-deranged laughter erupted from Senku as he stared down at the cure in his hands, his grip tight, almost shaking.
>
> *I wonder if I look half as crazy as I feel right now,* he thought absently, his mind teetering between exhilaration and exhaustion. The weight of everything—the trials, the failures, the sheer *time* spent clawing toward this moment, *what he was about to do*—it pressed down on him, yet all he could do was *laugh*.

Senku's mouth pressed into a thin line as he recognized the thoughts unfolding on screen. After watching Gen's petrification process, he understood how this playback worked—moments were *deliberately* taken out of chronological order, rearranged to highlight key truths. It was a *system*, an intentional design to provide illumination. But of *all* moments, why *this* one? Not now. Not *right after* he and Taiju had exchanged what could only be called *forgiveness*, for lack of a better word.

"Senku?" Ukyo's voice was careful, measured.

Senku didn't respond. His red eyes remained locked on the screen, unfocused in a way that was *rare* for him.

The others exchanged glances before slowly turning their full attention to him.

Their leader—so unshakable, so certain—looked… *off.*

And that alone was enough to fill the room with silent worry.

It was dark outside, the sun had yet to rise, and Taiju wouldn't be waking up for another few hours. *Perfect.* The ideal time for *necessary* experimentation. *It won't be long before Taiju wants to revive Yuzuriha, and before that, I need to make sure it's safe for a human.* Senku tightened his grip on the small jar in his hand, his mind already racing through the variables. This wasn't just about *having* the revival fluid—it was about *proving* it worked, about eliminating unknowns.

And to do that, he needed a test subject.

"So it's going to show us what you talked about with Taiju…" Kohaku breathed out, her voice quieter than usual, yet heavy with realization. Her golden eyes shone bright with something close to *horror.*

Senku's red eyes looked almost *hazy* as he made his way toward the cave, his steps uneven, uncharacteristically unsure. He kept glancing over his shoulder, like Taiju might *suddenly* appear behind him—watching, *judging.* As if, even now, some part of him already knew this was a line he *shouldn't* be crossing. No matter how necessary it was.

"Senku!" Taiju called out, his voice firm, his eyes bright with something steady—something *unshakable*.

Senku, his gaze frozen on the screen, turned toward him. For a moment, they just looked at each other. Really *looked* at each other. No words, no explanations—just an understanding that had long since been built between them. Senku felt his heart rate settle, just slightly. The tension gripping his chest loosened, enough that he almost wanted to huff out that familiar grin Taiju always managed to pull from him. Keyword being *almost.*

Idiot.

Another sickening giggle escaped Senku's mouth as he shook his head in self-disgust.

"Acting so paranoid when I know logically there's only one other human in the world, and he's currently sleeping. I'm disappointed in myself."

Still, the unease clung to him, something *primal*, something logic alone couldn't erase. Senku stopped as he reached the entrance of the cave—the very place where he had awakened, where this *entire* ordeal had begun. And in front of it, laid out with careful precision, were the fractured remains of a statue. Taiju had placed the pieces together with painstaking care, reconstructing her form as best as humanly possible. Even so, there were gaps, jagged and cruel, spaces where pieces had eroded away beyond recovery. No matter how perfectly he arranged them, she would never be *whole* again.

Senku dropped to his knees before the statue, pressing the fragments as close together as he could, as if sheer willpower alone could bridge the spaces time had stolen.

The healing capability of this is crazy, you know that, he reminded himself, his mind grasping for the rational. *Before I starved, it gave me athletic ability I could've only dreamed of in the old days.*

It's just a hypothesis.

*But it's a **likely** hypothesis.*

"That would explain why people like Tsukasa became really crazy when they woke back up, but what about people like Kohaku?"

Senku was more than willing to share this particular hypothesis—*especially* if it meant redirecting his thoughts back to the science of it.

"Remember how, back in the day, there were huge bugs, even bigger dinosaurs, and *massive* trees?" he explained, his voice regaining its usual confident cadence. "It works the same way—higher oxygen levels in the atmosphere led to organisms growing way beyond what we're used to. The petrification didn't last long enough to modify human appearance, but internally? Our systems are running *way* better than before. Better circulation, stronger muscle efficiency, even improved neural pathways."

He smirked. "We're *probably* still capable of cross-breeding, too."

"Give a lot of thought to cross-breeding, Senku-chan?" Gen quipped, a teasing edge in his voice. He didn't quite manage to *sell* it, though—his voice still held the remnants of everything they were witnessing, too shaky to fully land the joke. But Senku caught the effort. And somehow, he found himself *appreciating* it.

We need to know.

We need to be sure before we attempt this on other statues.

I promised to carry the mental burden.

Senku exhaled slowly, steadying himself. No hesitation. No wavering. This was *necessary.*

Gen bit back a sigh, but at least he knew—*really knew*—that things had changed since then. Senku had *shared* the burden. Not all of it, maybe not even *most* of it, but some. Especially with *him.* They were always the ones coming up with ideas that would *absolutely* send them straight to hell together. Senku wasn't carrying the mental burden alone anymore. And as far as Gen was concerned, he *never would* again.

Senku placed a wavering hand over his eyes, pressing down with enough weight that, if *willpower* alone could erase a migraine, it would have disappeared by now. It didn't. With a slow exhale, he lowered his hand, fingers brushing over the equation stitched into his collar. A grounding point. A calculation that *made sense* when nothing else did.

He swallowed, forcing himself to gather. *Steady. Controlled.*

Fool yourself.

I can fake myself into confidence.

It's possible, but… Gen thought to himself, watching Senku closely. *The circumstances are pretty extreme. I'm not sure even* ***I*** *could pull it off at a time like this.*

Psychology books would claim it was possible. Fake it till you make it—convince yourself of something hard enough, and eventually, it *becomes* true. Generally, Senku was already so confident that it didn't even *matter.* There were *very* few things in life where he needed more confidence, but this? *This* just happened to be one of them.

It *bordered* on mad science.

What will people think of me when I get everything back on track?

Look, class, that's Ishigami Senku—the Stone Age version of Shiro Ishii.

The thought made something cold settle in his stomach, but he shoved it aside. *There was work to do.*

"I have no idea who that is!" Ryusui announced suddenly, his voice cutting through the tension far more effectively than Chrome's earlier attempt at a joke.

For a moment, there was silence. Then—

Senku, ever the scientist, ever the *ruiner* of well-meaning distractions, answered without missing a beat.

"Shiro Ishii was the head of *Unit 731*," Senku stated matter-of-factly, his voice cutting through the room with clinical detachment. "An infamous wartime research division in Japan. His specialty? *Human experimentation*, all under the guise of scientific advancement."

He didn't stop there.

"He orchestrated some of the most horrific studies in history—biological warfare, weaponized diseases, controlled infections designed to study the effects of plagues in real-time. He tested frostbite treatments by forcing prisoners to stand outside in subzero temperatures until their limbs *froze solid*, then shattered their fingers just to see what would happen. Vivisections? Standard practice—often performed *without anesthesia*. He wanted to examine how the human body reacted to extreme trauma *while still alive*."

A heavy silence fell over the group, thick and suffocating.

Chrome looked *sick*, his earlier attempt at levity completely gone. Kohaku's fingers curled into fists, barely containing her revulsion. Ukyo's jaw tightened, his usual calm demeanor cracking ever so slightly. Even Gen, who had likely heard of Unit 731 before, had gone rigid beside him.

Ryusui, staring at Senku like he had *personally* just ruined his day, finally blurted, "*What the actual hell, Senku?!*"

Senku, completely unfazed, simply shrugged. "You *did* ask." *And I'm not in the right frame of mind, admittedly.*

"Science isn't about what's easy. It's about doing what's best for everyone," Senku reminded himself, forcing the words to steady him.

With a slow, measured breath, he turned back to the petrified girl lying on the ground. He checked her over once. Then twice. Then a third time. Every fragment had been placed together as precisely as possible, every gap accounted for. He knew it wouldn't be perfect—too many pieces had eroded, lost forever—but he had done *everything* within his power to reconstruct her.

Now, all that was left was to see if science could do the rest.

"You know you're right," Gen said, his voice softer than usual, carefully measured.

Senku turned to him, giving the Mentalist a long, weighted look. His red eyes were heavy—not just with exhaustion, but with *something deeper.*

Gen held his gaze, unflinching.

For once, there was no teasing, no dramatic flair. Just understanding.

Then, he took out the bottle and poured the fluid over the girl.

It took longer than it had for the bird. Exactly *13.78 seconds longer.* Senku's grip on the empty bottle tightened. His breath felt too slow, stretched between each second. He was starting to think—

It's not going to work.

Then—

A sharp, splintering *crack* echoed through the cave as fractures spiderwebbed across the stone. Pieces crumbled, falling away in jagged chunks. Senku forced himself to *watch*. He had to. This moment—the first human revival by their own means—was *history*. A *victory*. But instead of a miracle, he saw *flesh and blood*. Deep, gaping wounds where stone had preserved the *absence* of what had once been there. Places carved *down to the bone*. Eyes that had been petrified *wide open* regaining color—only for that color to fade, the life in them snuffed out before it could even begin. And then, *blood*. Pooling beneath her, seeping between the cracks of the earth—far too much, far too fast.

Senku inhaled sharply, but it didn't feel like breathing.

"I don't think I would ever choose to let you guys see this," Senku quickly announced, his voice sharp, *angry*. Which was rare, because Senku never *sounded* angry. Even when Tsukasa had stood over him, ready to strike. Even when Tsukasa had *killed* in front of him. Senku had always maintained that same cool, calculated composure.

Everyone had their *limit*.

Gen rubbed his chin, his eyes flicking toward Senku, measured and thoughtful. "You *did* say it was you, ten billion percent."

"I *wouldn't* want you guys to see this," Senku repeated, adamant, unshakable. The anger in his voice had already vanished, brief as it was, but the certainty remained. Even when affected by emotions, Senku wasn't the type to say something like that without reason. Without *suspecting* something.

Gen raised an eyebrow, prompting him forward.

"It must have been transactional in some way," Senku admitted, though his voice was distant, like he was still piecing it together himself. "It's not just me behind this."

But does that even matter? Gen knew Senku well—*too* well, and Senku *knew* that. It was the Mentalist's *job* to understand people, so it shouldn't have been surprising when Gen spoke his next thought *before Senku could even form it.*

"You *wouldn't* have done this if you hadn't measured whether it would be a *net good* or not," Gen pointed out, his tone light, but his eyes sharp. "Like you said earlier, Senku, you wouldn't have done this without ten billion percent certainty."

I wouldn't have, Senku agreed, *logically*. On *principle*, yes. But his *principles* meant nothing to the feeling currently sinking deep into his gut, cold and unrelenting, as he watched the screen. Not when most of his companions were still staring at the playback in horror, barely even registering the conversation between him and Gen.

…Blood is pooling beneath her body… Senku noted it with a strange, disassociated calm, his mind instinctively cataloging the details even as something deep within him recoiled. The pieces that had fit together perfectly had reconnected—bone knitting seamlessly, tendons weaving back into place, the largest human organ, *skin*, reforming with eerie precision.

What a fascinating process.

Scientifically, it was *incredible*.

The group looked sick, some to greater levels than others, but the majority had paled to an unnatural level of white. Senku wanted to hang his head but forced himself to stay facing toward. It was required, it was science, *no one else could have done it, and we needed that information.*

The self-assurance barely helped.

Senku felt sick to his stomach as he stared.

His mind droned on mechanically, detached, falling into cold, logical assessment. *Experiment successful. The fluid will work on a fully intact statue with ten billion percent certainty.* His own internal voice sounded wrong—*too clinical, too distant,* mirroring the cold calculation that had led him here in the first place. The decision-making process where he had deemed this experiment *necessary*, where he had accepted that the *most likely* outcome was failure, that he was *most likely* bringing back something already *dead.*

I can't let Taiju come across this, Senku decided.

The girl still had all her limbs, even if the erosion had left large, gaping wounds across her body. If Taiju saw this—

No. *He wouldn't.*

Senku reached forward, grabbing her hand.

Her skin was *warm*.

His stomach twisted violently.

He felt like he was going to *throw up.*

The image *paused*.

Taiju was already moving—standing, walking over toward Senku with steady, purposeful steps. Senku barely had time to process before he was being *pulled up*, yanked into motion. For a brief second, he considered that he might finally be getting the well-deserved punch he *definitely* wouldn't argue against.

Instead—

He was pulled into a hug. Senku huffed, unimpressed but not resisting. He didn't return the gesture, didn't move to wrap his arms around Taiju, but he also didn't pull away. He just *stood there*. And yet, the hard lines of his body softened, the tense edges along his shoulders loosening ever so slightly. This was the worst part of all of this. The absolute *worst* thing he had ever done.

And still—

Taiju didn't condemn him.

Still, *no one* was speaking out against him.

It…

Senku didn’t know what to do with that.

He started to pull her body out of the direct line of sight of the cave, dragging her toward the area where he had done his other prep work. A shallow hole had already been dug—something he had prepared in advance, right after the successful experiment on the bird. Even *then*, he had known. He had anticipated this outcome, had accounted for the likelihood that he would need to *bury her*.

The body caught on a rock.

Senku gritted his teeth, adjusting his grip. He pulled again, harder this time, but the resistance made him nearly stumble. His breath hitched.

He stopped.

He took a deep breath.

Calm.

He exhaled slowly, letting the cold logic settle back over him like a shield. Then, with steady movements, he dragged her the rest of the way to the hole and pushed her in.

"Thank you, Senku."

Ryusui’s voice broke the silence—not loud and commanding as usual, but soft. Softer than any of them had ever heard from him.

It was *jarring*.

Senku instinctively pulled away from Taiju’s continued embrace, turning to look at Ryusui with open confusion. He simply shrugged, Ryusui's usual self-assured posture still intact, but his smile—though close to his usual grin—lacked its usual fire.

"We needed that information," Ryusui continued, steady and certain. "And you carried that burden alone all this time. *Thank you.*"

Gen and Ukyo nodded in agreement, their expressions unreadable but *firm*.

The others still seemed lost in their thoughts, but that was enough.

Senku exhaled, tension unwinding from his frame just a little more.

He wheezed, gasping for air that refused to fill his lungs.

His body felt distant, movements automatic as he knelt beside the shallow grave, absently shoveling dirt over the lifeless form of a young girl.

One handful. Then another. Then another.

The minutes stretched. He stayed there for an *hour*, methodically covering the body, mind churning with thoughts he couldn't afford to entertain.

I have to. I have to come out of this on the other side. I can't let this be for nothing. Taiju should wake up soon. I need to go back. I need to… He swallowed hard, forcing himself to look at the puddle of blood, now rapidly sinking into the dirt, fading as if it had never been there at all. His throat clenched. His stomach twisted. He swallowed the bile rising up and turned away. By the time he reached camp, after an *hour-long* walk through the quiet, empty world, he had successfully painted a smirk back onto his face.

It felt hollow.

"Well, now that we have *that* settled, please excuse *Senku-chan* and I for a moment! We have *some things* to discuss~!" Gen's voice was smooth, teasing—but there was no room for argument. Before anyone could protest, he grabbed Senku's wrist and pulled him away from Taiju, leading him off without so much as a glance back.

Senku looked *thoroughly* put out by the abrupt kidnapping, but as they walked, a grin eventually worked its way onto his lips.

"Mentalist."

"Scientist," Gen replied smoothly as they made their way toward one of the more secluded parts of the ship.

Once they were alone, Gen stopped. He turned toward Senku, stepping close. Uncomfortably close—*pointedly* close. Close enough that Senku *knew* this wasn't disgust, wasn't pity, wasn't some attempt to pull away from him. No room for doubt, no room for misinterpretation.

Gen *stared him down*.

"If you have something to say, *Mentalist*," Senku dared, leaning in just slightly, testing Gen's resolve, "You should just *say* it."

But Gen's gaze didn't waver. His expression held nothing but certainty. Nothing but *respect*.

"Mental burden. We share it." Gen declared.

Senku blinked.

Then, without a word, he stepped back, exhaling sharply as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"...Fine."

Chapter 8: Episode 2 Part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"If you have something to say, Mentalist," Senku dared, leaning in just slightly, testing Gen's resolve, "You should just say it."

But Gen's gaze didn't waver. His expression held nothing but certainty. Nothing but respect.

"Mental burden. We share it." Gen declared.

Senku blinked.

Then, without a word, he stepped back, exhaling sharply as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"...Fine."

They stood there in silence, eyes locked. Even after taking a step back, Senku could still *feel* the heat of Gen's presence. Or maybe… *was that in his head?* His throat worked as he swallowed, resisting the instinct to redirect his gaze. He wasn't the type to flinch away—he *refused* to start now.

But Gen was *smirking*.

And it only widened with each passing second.

"Senku-chan," Gen purred, his voice practically dripping with amusement. "Your pupils just dilated by 0.0048 millimeters, and your pulse increased by 3.78 percent."

Senku's mind cataloged the numbers instantly, logic kicking in before anything else. A simple autonomic response. Raised pulse? *Startle reaction.* Pupil dilation? *Light adjustment.* A trick of the dim interior of the ship, *obviously*.

Except—

Gen was still *holding his wrist*. And *still* measuring his pulse, thumb pressing lightly against his skin in a way that felt pointed. Senku noticed it just as Gen hummed under his breath. "Oh, and it just jumped again—now we're at 4.37 percent. You *wouldn't* be reacting to *me*, would you, Senku-chan~?"

Senku felt his jaw tighten. *Damn Mentalist.* He *was* testing something. Probing. Waiting to see if Senku would flinch, if he'd shift his weight, if he'd so much as *blink* in a way that gave anything away.

Gen smiled, wide and knowing, like he had just *confirmed something*. "They'll *miss us* if we're gone too long, Senku-chan~!"

And then, just like that, he turned and *skipped* back toward the main room. Senku didn't move. Just *watched* Gen go, feeling what he *knew* was an ever-so-slight flush creeping across his cheeks. The damned psychologist was *playing* him. And worse—Senku had the distinct, nagging feeling that Gen had just *gotten exactly what he wanted*. Taking a slow, measured breath, Senku tilted his head back, staring up at the sky as if it might offer answers.

Damn Mentalist.

He was so interesting.

Five minutes later, Senku had fully regained control of his faculties and returned to his seat.

"You okay, Senku?" Chrome asked, brow furrowed slightly in concern.

Senku flashed a grin—something almost *rueful*. "I got a therapy session; I'm fine now."

If you could count *getting pulled aside by a licensed psychologist, grilled like a test subject, and somehow coming out of it feeling like a weight had been lifted* as therapy, then yeah—he'd *had* a therapy session. Not that he was about to *elaborate*. The last thing he needed was anyone prying further—not when the mere thought of it *still* threatened to make him flush again. He pointedly ignored the amused glance he could *feel* Gen shooting his way.

Damn Mentalist.

> Taiju climbed the enormous roots of the camphor tree, each step steady, determined. The tree was *massive*, its scope and health nothing short of impressive—thriving, even after thousands of years.
>
> *Sorry I kept you waiting for 3,700 years, Yuzuriha.*
>
> He reached her stone form, standing before her at last.
>
> *I'm going to bring you back to life now.*

"It feels *so* good to see this after all the time Taiju spent thinking about her!" Kohaku practically *gushed*, eyes shining with enthusiasm.

Gen and Senku shared a *dry*, knowing look. Senku immediately turned his gaze back toward the television, *pointedly* ignoring the fact that his pulse had just jumped up a certain percentage *again*.

Chrome, unfortunately, lacked the knowledge—or self-preservation instincts—to keep his mouth shut. "Stop being *weird* already, jeez, Kohaku."

The temperature in the room *dropped*. Kohaku slowly turned toward Chrome, her eyes sharp, her expression dark. Chrome, *realizing* his mistake a half-second too late, immediately

clamped his mouth shut. Laughter *erupted* from the other loud blonde in the room.

"Ha! *Some* things never change!" Ryusui crowed, shaking his head in amusement.

Kohaku's deadly expression switched targets *immediately*.

"Oh? And *what* is that supposed to mean, Ryusui?" she simpered, all too sweetly.

Ryusui *kept laughing*—right up until the TV screen flickered back on.

> Senku extended the jar of revival fluid, holding it out for Taiju to take. Taiju reached for it—then abruptly *froze*. His entire body went rigid as a *very* important realization struck him like a bolt of lightning.
>
> "Wait, Senku!" Taiju turned to him in alarm, voice *urgent*. "Yuzuriha… is *naked*!"
>
> Senku barely had time to process the words—his red eyes just *barely* widening in recognition—before Taiju *lunged*. Two fingers *jabbed* straight into Senku's eyes with full, unrestrained force.
>
> "GAH—!" Senku *yelled* in pain, staggering backward, hands flying up to his face.
>
> He had just enough presence of mind to think, *This oaf is going to **blind me** before we even bring her back.*

"...Did Taiju just attempt to *blind* our best chance at rebuilding society?" Ukyo stated—*more* than asked—his expression utterly *put out*.

"Sure looks like it," Gen hummed, a little too amused.

Ryusui, arms crossed, let out a *booming* laugh. "A bold move, but hardly profitable!"

Kohaku snorted. "Well, at least Yuzuriha's *honor* is intact, even if Senku's eyesight isn't."

"**WE CAN'T REVIVE HER LIKE THIS!**" Taiju *yelled*, looking *practically unhinged* at the *sheer horror* of the idea. Senku, still *reeling* from the attack on his vision, blindly *stumbled* down from the massive tree root, his hands pressed *firmly* against his eyes.

"*Here we go again*—" he *hissed*, voice dripping with frustration. "With your **illogical stupidity!**"

"I would have *thought* Senku-chan would know better than to try using **logic** against his *long-time* friend," Gen mused, watching the chaos unfold with no small amount of amusement.

Senku scoffed, tilting his head slightly—though not too much, given the *lingering* pain in his eyes. "The *pain* of almost going **blind** can make you forget things."

Taiju, still looking *guiltily determined*, turned toward Senku with the *full force* of a puppy-dog expression, wide-eyed and remorseful. Senku didn't even *look* at him—just waved a hand haphazardly in his direction, a dismissive yet *clear* gesture.

Taiju *beamed*.

Forgiveness accepted.

Senku *lowered* his hands just enough to glare at Taiju through watery, red-rimmed eyes. They were even *redder* than usual, irritated from both the *direct assault* on his vision and the sheer *absurdity* of this argument.

"It's an *emergency* situation, and we're in a *Stone World!"* he snapped, voice still raw with lingering pain. "Nobody is around to care if your naked butt is showing or if your *dick* is hanging out!"

Taiju gasped, pointing at Senku with all the righteous *outrage* of a man defending something sacred.

"YUZURIHA DOESN'T HAVE A DICK!"

Silence.

Gen *wheezed*.

Ukyo covered his mouth, shoulders shaking.

Kohaku *lost it*, doubling over with laughter, while Chrome *visibly cringed* as if he had taken *psychic damage*.

Again, Ryusui laughed, "Are the two of you the comic relief of the stone world?"

> Senku's face twisted in frustration as he snapped, "That's not the point!" *You're thinking with your dick, you oaf! I couldn't care less about Yuzuriha—do you know me at all?*

"You should appreciate her beauty more!" Taiju declared, looking almost offended by Senku's indifference.

Senku didn't even try to hide his look of disgust. His nose scrunched, lips curling like he'd just been asked to lick a rock covered in bird shit. He recoiled slightly, arms crossing as if to physically distance himself from the very idea.

Gen raised an eyebrow. "So you want Senku-chan *not* to look but also to appreciate her beauty?"

"Exactly!"

"Heh." Gen let out an aborted chuckle. Taiju's logic was as baffling as ever—almost as funny as Senku's sheer revulsion at the idea of looking at Yuzuriha like that.

Taiju hoisted Yuzuriha’s petrified form over his head with ease. "We’ll take her back to camp and get her some clothes!"

Senku sighed. He really should have seen this coming. "Geez… Exactly how heavy is that statue?"

Taiju bristled immediately. "Yuzuriha is not fat!"

"Intriguingly, the phenomenon of petrifaction imparts a significant reduction in the mass of a human subject," Senku theorized, voice slipping into lecture mode. "While it outwardly resembles stone and retains its tactile properties, the weight is markedly diminished. Kind of like a denser version of aerated polystyrene."

Silence.

Everyone stared at him, blank, even Chrome.

"That... actually follows, doesn't it?" Gen mused, eyes flickering with thought.

Senku turned toward him. "Mentalist?"

"Well," Gen drawled, "Even with a strong etching agent like Nital as our miracle fluid, if it were actual stone, just pouring it on wouldn’t dissolve the outer layer so quickly. But if you were to use something like that on styrofoam..."

Senku swallowed.

Styrofoam in contact with Nital would disintegrate instantly, reduced to nothing.

A flush rushed to his cheeks before he could stop it, heat crawling up his neck like an embarrassing biological betrayal. He stared at Gen openly, unable to help the way his eyes lingered—sharp, searching, like he was analyzing an equation that had suddenly solved itself in a way he hadn't anticipated. The sheer satisfaction of hearing someone else arrive at the same conclusion, of keeping up with his thought process, sent an unexpected jolt through his

system. The urge to let his jaw drop was nearly overwhelming, but Senku *just* managed to rein it in, locking his expression into something neutral—almost. His lips parted slightly, as if caught between a scoff and something far less dismissive.

Gen fought back the urge to *positively* simper.

The way Senku was so blatantly attracted whenever he said something halfway intelligent was just too entertaining. Senku was already an anomaly that most modern psychologists would *drool* over studying, but was he also a prime case of sapiosexuality?

How fascinatingly rare—Senku-chan doesn't do *anything* in halves~!

"Seriously, oaf?"

Senku stomped to the edge of the clearing, dragging a hand down his face. With a weary slump, he muttered, "That is *not* the point… Besides—"

Straightening, he shot Taiju an exasperated look. "Wouldn't it be ten billion times quicker to just wake her up and have her *walk* back? Just how illogical can you—"

A deep, guttural roar cut through the air, low and reverberating in his chest.

Senku froze. Instinct slammed through him before logic could catch up, his pulse spiking as his words died in his throat. His eyes widened—sharp, alert, animalistic fear overriding analysis for once. He spun toward the opposite side of the clearing, where the sound had come from. The soft, rhythmic growls hadn't stopped. Something *big* lurked just beyond the brush, hidden in the shifting darkness of the undergrowth. Watching. Waiting.

The entire group tensed, eyes widening in silent worry. Gen felt his earlier amusement drop like a stone in his stomach, the shift in tone abrupt and absolute. The only one who didn't look concerned was Kohaku—thoughtful instead, calculating. Gen could see why. She was the only one here who could take the beast on and *win.* Even Ukyo, as strong as he was, would be useless without his bow. No one else had a chance. Still, for Gen, something stood out even more than the roar itself.

Senku's face.

He had *never* seen that expression on their so-called fearless leader before. Not like this. Pure, unfiltered fear.

Gen kept an eye on Senku, watching out of the corner of his vision.

Now, he looked relaxed again, arms loose, posture easy—but there was something *off* about it. Too calculated. Too much like someone compensating.

"Senku, aren't you treating this a little *too* casually?!" Chrome blurted, still rattled.

Senku blinked at him, like he didn't get the fuss. "Logically speaking, with our current advancements, something like this wouldn't be a big deal. But at *that* point in time?" He exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah. We were screwed."

That admission alone made the tension crackle.

"Then why do you look so relaxed now?" Gen probed, eyes sharp.

Senku's fingers twitched slightly, barely noticeable. He shrugged. "Because it's already done. I don't waste energy panicking over the past." *Plus, It's going to get heavy later, better to try and get a mental break while he still could.*

"Wait, big oaf!"

Senku's voice cut through the air, sharp with urgency. His arm shot out in a halting gesture, every muscle in his body wound tight as a spring. Taiju hesitated, Yuzuriha's statue still hoisted above his head. The growling shifted—low and rolling at first, then sharpening into something *meaner.* More aggressive. Awareness dawned slowly on Taiju's face, a creeping unease settling into his expression as he turned to follow Senku's gaze. His eyes narrowed, scanning the far side of the clearing, straining to catch movement in the shifting shadows beyond the trees. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His grip on Yuzuriha's statue tightened.

"You both got serious *real* fast. Has something like this happened before?" Ukyo observed, his tone calm but curious.

Taiju paused, considering for a moment before breaking into his usual cheer. "Nope! But Senku got serious, so I knew it had to be dangerous."

Senku was sweating now, his teeth clenched as he glared at the bushes, red eyes sharp with grim apprehension. The growling deepened. Then, with slow, deliberate steps, a massive male lion emerged from the undergrowth, its golden mane rippling in the light.

It *roared.*

A raw, thunderous sound that sent shivers down Senku's spine. His whole body went rigid, adrenaline took over.

They started running.

Still clutching Yuzuriha's statue, he tore through the forest at full speed, his massive strides barely keeping ahead of sheer *panic.* He strained to glance back over his shoulder, his voice cracking as he yelled, "WHY IS THERE A LION IN JAPAN?!"

"DESCENDED FROM A ZOO ANIMAL!" Senku shouted back, lungs burning as he sprinted. His wide eyes flicked behind him, bulging with barely contained terror. "Caretakers must've been petrified with the cage open or *something!*"

"Just when you think brown bears are the biggest predator in the forest," Gen mused, glancing at Senku. "Think they battled for supremacy? I don't think we've seen any."

Senku scoffed. "Huh? What're you asking *me* for? Look to our experts." He jabbed a thumb toward Chrome and Kohaku.

Kohaku tilted her head. "Aren't bears just part of old stories?"

Chrome nodded, frowning in thought. "Yeah… We don't have those!"

Senku hummed, considering. If neither of them had ever seen a brown bear, then they'd probably been hunted out. It made sense—up against wolves and lions, solitary bears would've been at a disadvantage. No pack, no chance.

A mental image flashed through Senku's mind—a pride of lions tearing into a buffalo in an overgrown zoo enclosure.

"And if they got out with no humans around," Senku panted, "Every herbivore in the zoo would've been easy prey… and if they reached the city—"*pet buffet.*"

They sprinted past rocky cliffs overlooking the vast, endless forest, feet pounding against the earth.

"So now they've *literally* become the King of Beasts!" Taiju shouted, half in awe, half in terror.

Senku's breath came faster, each word dragged out between gulps of air. An almost imperceptible edge of *despair* crept into his voice.

"In this stone world… humans are *not* at the top of the food chain anymore."

"You're *terrified*..." Kohaku breathed, eyes narrowing as she studied him.

Senku barely spared her a glance. "Not everyone is a wild gorilla like you," he deadpanned.

Kohaku scowled but didn't let it drop. "It's just… you always seem so calm under pressure. I've never seen you *this* shaken before."

Damn it—damn my useless stamina, damn my inability to feed myself properly—now is *not* the time for this! Think. Think logically. What can we— DAMN IT!

"You woke up a little stronger, like the rest of us, but you were already starving," Gen mused, his tone casual but his eyes sharp. "And all that extra healing from the petrification? It probably went straight into keeping your body running instead of building up your stamina."

Senku let out a sharp exhale, already tired of this conversation. He shot Gen a flat look. "It's not that impressive when your theory is just something I *already* figured out. Don't make me copyright my thoughts."

Gen grinned. "So you *admit* it was attractive earlier—"

"Mentalist, *watch the damn TV.* You're ruining the tense mood."

Gen hummed, completely undeterred. "Oh, my bad, Senku-chan. It must be so *stressful* being both a genius *and* ridiculously easy to fluster."

Senku rolled his eyes, tilting his head back as if he were reconsidering every life choice that led to this moment. "Yeah, sure, whatever helps you sleep at night."

Gen wiggled his fingers playfully. "Come on, Senku-chan, you *love* it when I figure things out."

Senku sighed. "Loving it and tolerating it are two different things."

Gen just chuckled, clearly pleased with himself, and finally turned back to the screen.

Senku didn't.

Because—*damn it*—Gen *was* right.

There was something undeniably interesting about seeing someone keep up with his thoughts, about Gen making the same leaps in logic and piecing things together before Senku even had to explain. And, yeah. Maybe it was even a little attractive. Senku knew himself well enough to recognize the pattern. He had only felt this way once before—years ago, with his old science mentor. A man whose sheer intelligence had been so staggering, so far beyond

anyone else, that Senku had assumed it was a *one-off*. That he was only drawn to *that* level of brilliance, something so rare that he'd never encounter it again.

But now, here was Gen.

Gen, who joked and misdirected and played the fool, but still *kept up*. Who could take half a theory and fill in the blanks before Senku even had to explain. Who could throw out conclusions that Senku was still in the middle of reaching.

It was unexpected.

Unwanted.

And yet.

Senku dragged a hand down his face, exhaling sharply. Not that it mattered. Not that he was about to *do* anything about it.

He refused to be that predictable.

> The lion let out another roar, deep and rumbling, its heavy paws pounding against the earth. It wasn't even running at full speed—but it didn't have to. It was still *gaining*. Senku and Taiju kept their eyes locked on the predator, trying to track its every move. Neither of them noticed the steep cliff ahead—until it was too late.
>
> The ground vanished beneath their feet.
>
> Both of them screamed as they plummeted, weightless for a terrifying second. Still midair, Taiju twisted instinctively, arms tightening around Yuzuriha's petrified form, shifting his body to take the impact for her.
>
> Then—
>
> The drop wasn't sheer. After a two-meter freefall, the vertical rockface gave way to a steep, jagged slope. They hit *hard*. Too fast to stop, too out of control to brace

themselves. They tumbled, rolled, slid—sharp rocks tearing at them, gravity refusing to let up. The world blurred into motion, a relentless, unforgiving force dragging them down.

And then—impact.

The final collision rattled their bones as they hit the ground, sprawling at the bottom of the cliff. For a long moment, neither of them moved. They lay flat on their backs, eyes squeezed shut against the pain, chests rising and falling in sharp, uneven breaths. Yuzuriha's statue remained perfectly intact, resting securely across Taiju's chest.

"That is beyond lucky," Ukyo breathed.

Senku huffed, arms crossed as he considered whether it was worth installing a rewind button just to hammer in his point. Probably too much work. "Luck had nothing to do with it," he said instead. "If you actually *pay attention* to what happened, you'll notice Taiju making micro-adjustments the entire way down—shifting, rolling, taking every hit himself just to keep Yuzuriha completely safe."

He let out a sharp exhale, shaking his head. "As expected of the oaf."

They struggled to push themselves up, muscles screaming in protest. Their bodies trembled, battered and exhausted—but there was no time to rest. A growl rumbled through the air. Not as close as before, but closing in. The rustling of underbrush followed, leaves and branches shifting as something large moved toward them. Every instinct screamed at them to *run*, but their legs felt like dead weight beneath them.

They forced themselves to move faster.

Then, more roars. Multiple. Echoing through the trees, joining the first. The hunt wasn't over. The sound of their own frantic footsteps pounded against the ground, leather-clad feet barely keeping ahead of the inevitable.

"But… Why aren't they actually attacking yet?" Taiju huffed, glancing back as he ran.

Senku let out a breathless chuckle between gasps for air. "Heheheh… From *their* perspective, we're probably some weird, bipedal creatures they've never seen before."

"I'd tweak that theory a bit,"Senku explained, "The lions *do* see humans as a threat—but they were probably assessing whether we were more like hunters or helpless cubs. Clearly, they

landed on ‘kids’ and figured attacking was worth the risk."

Gen, never one to miss an opportunity, let out a playful hum. "Ohh, and was that decision influenced by the way *someone’s* running technique looks like a panicked fish flailing in water~?"

Senku rolled his eyes. "Haha," he deadpanned.

Ryusui, who had been *far too* quiet until now, smirked and leaned forward. "Ahh, but that’s the true *thrill* of nature, isn’t it? To face the wild as a mere man, no longer sitting atop the food chain! Ah, how I *desire* to experience such a chase firsthand—though, of course, I’d be far more *graceful* in my escape."

Senku shot him a look, unimpressed. "Yeah? Let’s test that next time we see a lion. I’ll personally make sure you get a *head start.*"

Gen chuckled. "Now *that’s* a pay-per-view event I’d like to see~."

Taiju’s expression hardened. "We’re the only humans in this world."

He ran just ahead of Senku, his longer strides keeping him at the front while Senku visibly struggled to keep up. More lionesses had joined the chase. Their sleek bodies moved in coordinated precision, closing in—but not too fast. They were keeping a calculated distance, waiting. Stalking. Not good. *Not good.* More lionesses. The males fatten themselves up while the *females* do all the hunting—

"They’re being cautious," Senku gasped, lungs burning with every step. "Keeping their distance."

His red eyes flicked back, sweat dripping into them, but there was no time to wipe it away. His voice came hoarse, strained. "But it’s only a matter of time now."

Even as his body screamed, he kept running at the brutal pace they’d set from the beginning. His face had gone pale from exertion, but his mouth still curled into something halfway between a grin and a grimace.

"Even if we get *super* lucky and make it all the way back to camp," he panted, "the best we can do is fight them with spears."

Game over, Senku thought with a wide grin, his mind whirling as he tried to think of a solution.

"How can you *grin* when you're thinking things like that?"

Senku blinked at their sonar specialist, caught off guard for half a second.

It wasn't something he ever *thought* about—it was just something he *did.* Grinning through exhaustion, through danger, through worst-case scenarios. His mind ran calculations, mapped out probabilities, and somewhere in the middle of it all, his mouth still found a way to curve upward.

Exceptions were scarce.

Truthfully, he didn't have an answer.

So he just shrugged.

Taiju glanced backwards as he ran; the bigger teen was still going strong, but his face contorted with dread.

"He's checking on you, not the lions," Kohaku observed.

For once, the weight of reality cracked through his voice. Senku kept running, but the strain in his tone was unmistakable—something raw, something he had never let himself feel before, "This game was practically over from the start!"

For a moment, silence hung heavy between them.

None of them had ever heard that tone in Senku's voice before.

"Senku..." Chrome whispered, his usual curiosity replaced with quiet concern. His gaze lingered on his mentor, searching, worried.

Senku, noticing the way the others were looking at him—like they were seeing *too much*—straightened up, forcing his expression back to something more composed.

"Guys, guys, don't get all heavy on me," he said, waving a dismissive hand. "If I ever have thoughts too heavy like that, I'd talk to Gen about it!"

...Now I would, anyway.

The thought landed before he could stop it. His mind flickered back—back to their meeting, to the closeness, to the *too-tight* grip on his wrist. To the way Gen had offered to share the burden like it was the easiest thing in the world. Senku barely realized he had been staring at him.

Gen, ever perceptive, caught it instantly and sent him a slow, knowing wink.

Senku immediately refocused on the screen, willing his attention back to the present. He wasn't about to get caught slipping. Besides—he was *grateful* for the distraction. The helplessness unraveling on screen had been seeping a little *too* deep, pulling at something he didn't have time to acknowledge.

> Taiju clenched his eyes shut for a split second, then snapped them open, blazing with furious resolve. Without hesitation, he *skidded* to a stop, his feet digging deep grooves into the dirt. Senku barely had time to process what was happening before Taiju *threw* Yuzuriha's stone body straight at him.
>
> "Wha—? *Ow!*"
>
> Senku barely caught the statue, the force of it knocking him off balance. He stumbled, knees hitting the ground as he instinctively wrapped his arms around Yuzuriha's

petrified form. When he looked up, Taiju was already standing in front of him—*planted* between him and the approaching lions. His stance was wide, his chest rising and falling in sharp, determined breaths. Teeth clenched. Eyes wild. His massive hands were raised, braced to take the hit. Ready to block *anything.*

"You're kidding…" Gen whispered it to no one in particular, eyes widening as the pieces clicked into place. He saw exactly where this was going. And it wasn't that he *disagreed*—no, the logic checked out. Every single thing he knew about Taiju, about his unwavering loyalty, his reckless selflessness, slotted neatly into place. Of course this was what he would do.

Still…

A sharp intake of breath came from Chrome, his hands gripping the edge of his seat. "No way—he's not actually—?"

Kohaku scowled, fists clenching at her sides. "What an idiot," she muttered, but there was no real anger in her voice—only frustration. Frustration that she *understood* why he was doing it. That she knew, deep down, she would've done the same.

Ukyo exhaled slowly, his normally composed face flickering with something unreadable. His sharp hearing had already told him everything—the pounding of Taiju's heart, the way his breath hitched, the sheer *determination* behind it. "He's not hesitating."

Ryusui, for once, had nothing grand to declare. His lips pressed into a thin line, eyes narrowed in rare, quiet assessment. "Hah… a man who *desires* nothing but to protect the people he loves, even at the cost of his own life." His fingers drummed against his knee. "That kind of resolve is terrifying."

"Senku, more than anyone, I *cannot* let you die here!"

Taiju didn't look back. His stance was firm, his voice steady, but his eyes burned with wild, unshakable resolve.

"You're humanity's last bastion—the only one with real scientific knowledge…!"

He planted his feet even harder, muscles coiling with unshakable resolve. Every part of him was braced, ready to take the full force of what was coming—no hesitation, no second-guessing. His breath came heavy but steady, his heart hammering in his chest, but his focus never wavered. He wasn't thinking about himself. He was thinking about Yuzuriha—*still trapped in stone, helpless in Senku's arms.* About Senku—*brilliant, stubborn Senku, who carried the weight of the entire world on his back.* If Senku died, humanity's last hope died with him. If Yuzuriha was destroyed, there was no bringing her back. But Taiju? *Taiju could take the hit.* He *would* take the hit. Because if it meant keeping them alive, there was never any other choice. His voice rose, raw and absolute, carrying every ounce of conviction he had left to give—

"IF IT COMES DOWN TO THIS, I'LL BE YOUR SHIELD—"

"NO!"

Everyone stared at the screen, stunned.

Senku's voice—his *no*—still rang in their ears, sharp and unrelenting. It wasn't just a refusal. It was strong, weighty, *snappish*—laced with a raw, desperate emotion none of them had ever heard from him before. The kind of reaction that could only surface in a true life-or-death moment.

Senku himself sat stiffly, watching the screen with an unreadable expression. His posture was a little too closed off, his face a little too blank—like he was trying to distance himself from the weight of what had already happened.

This was a whole different side of their leader.

Senku's voice was sharp, forceful—*a command*—and it cut through the air like a whip.

Taiju froze.

For a moment, the sheer intensity of it shook him. Senku had *never* sounded like that before. But then, his resolve steadied, his determination reaffirming itself. Even so, he couldn't help but glance over his shoulder. Senku was still kneeling, Yuzuriha's statue clutched tightly in his arms. But his eyes—wide, panicked—stood out starkly against his pale face, burning redder than usual. His breath was ragged, his usual ironclad control over his emotions *gone*.

"Think it over *logically*!"

Ryusui looked blankly intrigued. "Senku, do you think you could've survived without Taiju at this point?"

If Gen hadn’t been watching, he would have missed it—that split-second flicker of something sharp, something dangerously close to a snarl curling at the corner of Senku’s lips. It vanished as quickly as it appeared, buried beneath forced logic as the scientist forced himself to think through the hypothetical.

"... It's impossible to know for sure," Senku admitted, reluctant but measured.

Senku could do it, Gen thought, the words forming so quietly in his mind it felt as if speaking them any louder might make them real. Senku-chan had that bad habit of underestimating himself.

But being able to do it doesn’t mean you should.

Gen’s gaze lingered on him, weighing the thought. If Senku had lost Taiju, would he still be the same? Or would something fundamental have cracked? The idea of a Senku without that moral tether—without someone keeping him grounded—was unsettling. A man with a mind like that, a future only he could see, and no one left to stop him? If Senku ever decided to rule, to seize power when no one else had the means to oppose him, he'd be unstoppable.

Practically a god.

Gen exhaled softly, forcing a grin as if that thought didn’t send a shiver down his spine. Good thing Senku was one of a kind.

> After snapping those words, Senku forced a thin veneer of calm into his voice. *I need to be convincing because—for the first time in his life—Taiju is technically acting more logically than me, and I need him to NOT DO THAT.*

"I use my head, and you use your body. We can’t afford to lose either one!" His voice wavered, desperation breaking through the cracks. The calm he’d tried to summon had already crumbled, laid bare in the urgency etched across his face. "When we make a run for it, it has to be both of us together!"

Taiju clenched his teeth, bowing his head for a moment before looking up to meet Senku’s gaze. His expression was tense, but his resolve was clear.

"Yeah. I understand!"

PLAYBACK RESTARTS IN 1 HOUR.

"You better understand!" Kohaku suddenly exclaimed, reaching over to smack Taiju upside the head. He barely blinked, the force of it not even making him flinch.

"What do you think Yuzuriha would feel if she woke up and found out you sacrificed yourself?!"

"I've created a demon," Senku mouthed to Gen, gesturing toward the rampaging fangirl.

"Honestly, it's a good thing Senku talked some sense into you, or I would’ve had to kill you myself!" Kohaku went on, arms crossed, expression severe.

"She's scary like this," Chrome muttered, inching closer to Senku, looking somewhere between fascinated and terrified.

"Ahhh, young Chrome, this is your first time witnessing such a phenomenon." Gen sighed dramatically, pressing a hand to his chest. "This is what we call a fangirl—"

"—If you had ended up dead, I would’ve had to revive you just so you could finally confess to her, so don’t go getting any ideas—"

"—They have a power that defies all logical explanation," Gen finished, shrugging helplessly.

Chrome turned to Senku, genuinely curious. "How does science explain this?"

Senku exhaled and pushed up his sleeves like a man preparing for battle. "Alright, listen up. The phenomenon you're witnessing is a mix of cognitive bias, adrenaline responses, and evolutionary psychology. Humans are social creatures, meaning our survival instinct is wired to form strong emotional bonds with leaders, protectors, or, in this case, perceived 'heroes.' When an individual exhibits exceptional physical or intellectual abilities—" he pointed lazily at Taiju, then himself, "—the brain releases dopamine, reinforcing emotional attachment. That's further amplified by mirror neurons, which trigger a secondhand fight-or-flight response when watching someone they admire in danger, or even in love. This results in exaggerated protective behavior, aka our lovely fanatical warrior here—"

He gestured toward Kohaku, who was still glaring at Taiju.

"—and is further complicated by latent cultural and environmental factors. You throw some unresolved romantic tension into the mix—"

"Hey!" Taiju protested.

"—and boom, instant biochemical chaos. Perfectly rational when you break it down."

Chrome stared at him, visibly overwhelmed. "...Right."

Gen clapped his hands together. "Aaaand there you have it, young Chrome! Science has spoken. No magic here—just hormones, adrenaline, and unchecked aggression!"

Kohaku narrowed her eyes. "I don't know what you just said, but it sounded vaguely insulting."

Senku grinned. "That's just science for you."

Chapter End Notes

what're ya'lls favourite secondary ships? Anything notable I should include?

Chapter 9: Episode 2 Part 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> They ran, feet pounding against the earth, but somehow, even with all the exertion, Senku felt his heartbeat steady. Taiju wasn't going to sacrifice himself. That single fact settled something in his chest. "...Besides, I know you'd never actually hit anyone. That's been true since we were kids. You might be an athlete—strong as an ox—but you're not a fighter."
>
> Taiju's expression tightened for half a second before something clicked in his mind.
>
> "I thought of something we can do instead!" he said suddenly, veering off course.
>
> Senku blinked but followed as the oaf took off in another direction.
>
> "Near the grapes I picked, I think I found who we need—a fighter. The strongest primate high-schooler, Shishio Tsukasa!"

"I guess it's that time, huh?" Gen sighed, though there was a flicker of curiosity in his eyes. He had always been interested in what those early days had been like between the three of them. After all, Tsukasa had once believed Senku was truly dead. *What led to that?* Gen wanted to know.

"Aha! So *that's* the Tsukasa guy who used to lead half the Kingdom of Science! Interesting! I can't wait to see him in action!" Ryusui laughed, utterly unaware of the weight of his own words. He wasn't there. He couldn't know.

Ukyo did. He cringed slightly.

Senku just chuckled, casual as ever. "If nothing else, that primate is a sight to see, that's for sure."

> Senku had no idea who this guy was, but at this point, he was willing to try anything. He knew—*knew*—reviving a fighter was a risk. If it had been an option earlier, he would have suggested finding someone like that *before* reviving Yuzuriha, even if it meant

forcing Taiju to wait a little longer. But this wasn't an ideal scenario. It was the worst possible one. The choice had already been made for them.

They reached the statue, lions still prowling at their heels, eyes glowing from the underbrush. Taiju took a little too long setting Yuzuriha against a tree. *Logically*, it made more sense to lay her flat so she wouldn't tip and break. But somehow, even knowing that all she had experienced in petrification was endless darkness, the oaf still tried explaining the situation to her. That was just like him.

Now wasn't the time.

"Don't waste your breath—" *Or our time.* "—Let's just pour it on him."

"Wait," Taiju said, his voice quieter than usual. "You… really thought about that?"

Senku blinked, glancing over at him. "Huh? Oh, yeah. It was just a logical assessment. If we'd had the choice, it would've made sense to revive a fighter first. It was too dangerous, though, just like I said—which is one of the reasons I never brought it up." He waved a hand dismissively. "Not like it matters now."

"But you *considered* it." Taiju frowned, his hands clenching on his knees. "You thought about waiting to revive Yuzuriha?"

Gen raised an eyebrow. *Oh.* That one struck a nerve. Things so rarely got to Taiju like that.

Kohaku scoffed, arms crossed. "Honestly, it would've been the smart thing to do. Even you should've realized that, Taiju."

"But I *wouldn't* have done it!" Taiju shot back, shaking his head. "No matter how logical it was, I never would have agreed to wait."

Senku sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I *know*. That's the other reason I didn't bring it up. It was just a thought, okay? In the end, we *did* go to revive her first. We only made that choice to switch it up because we were being chased by *carnivores*. It was out of our hands at that point."

Ukyo exhaled, his posture finally relaxing a little. "That must have been an awful thing to weigh, especially when you were already so wary of the risk."

"It *wasn't* a decision," Senku corrected, completely unfazed. "It was an observation. It was what we *needed* to survive. A decision implies we had other options." His expression remained neutral. "We didn't."

Gen leaned in, grinning, but his eyes were sharp with understanding. "Ohhh, but it *could* have been, huh? If circumstances had been different—if Taiju had actually been on board... if you knew a fighter you *trusted*—" He tilted his head. "Would you have done it, Senku-chan?"

Senku paused.

Gen caught the flicker of hesitation—so fast it almost wasn't there.

"Doesn't matter," Senku said smoothly, shrugging. "It didn't happen that way."

> Senku pulled out the revival fluid and poured it over the still, imposing statue. The lions, sensing their prey was cornered, emerged from the bushes. Their sleek forms moved in unison, circling, their muscles taut with cautious precision—hunters assessing whether to strike. Behind them, the sharp *crack* of stone breaking echoed through the air.
>
> Dark brown eyes blinked open, then narrowed, became sharp like knives in a fraction of a second, "What's the situation?"

"Wait, *that* was the first thing he said?!" Ryusui burst out, leaning forward with a mixture of admiration and disbelief. "Not even a second to process the fact that he just came back to life—he's already assessing the battlefield! Hah! *Now that's* a man who knows how to handle himself!"

Ukyo exhaled through his nose, shaking his head. "Of course he was ready. He probably realized the exact second he started waking up that something was happening."

Kohaku crossed her arms, her gaze narrowing slightly as she studied the screen. "Obviously. A man like that wouldn't be caught off guard by *anything*." Her voice held no skepticism—only respect. "I have to admit—that's impressive. His body reacted before his mind even had to catch up—*if* it even needed to. He's built for battle. His instincts are something else."

Chrome, on the other hand, looked *deeply* unsettled. "Uhhh, is no one else freaked out by that? He woke up, like… *immediately*, and instantly knew something was wrong. I take at *least* five minutes to figure out where I am when I wake up! And that's from *bed*, not *petrification*!"

Gen chuckled, tilting his head. "It *is* interesting, isn't it? No grogginess, no confusion, not even a second of hesitation—just *immediate* battlefield awareness." He pressed a finger to his lips in mock thoughtfulness. "I wonder if that's just natural instinct or if he'd already theorized how the revival would feel beforehand?"

"Both," Senku answered without hesitation, arms folded as he watched the playback. "Tsukasa's body was conditioned to react the *second* he came to. Even before petrification, he was the type to process threats *instantly*. So when his senses kicked in, his brain did the rest." He smirked slightly. "Now *that* is one brain I'd love to study. I'd *bet money* on his reaction to petrification being fascinating."

> Senku flinched. Even with just one eye revealed, he could tell—this guy was *sharp*. Normally, he'd appreciate that. In this situation… Well, you play the hand you're dealt.
>
> "Your whole body is covered in stone. There are lions from your nine o'clock to your two o'clock."
>
> "Yeah, okay," the man accepted without hesitation. More stone cracked and rumbled as he shifted, and then— With nothing but the force of his *own body*, he launched chunks of stone at the lions like artillery fire. The impact sent dust and debris flying, stunning the animals just long enough for him to charge. Bare-fisted.
>
> Senku barely had time to process what was happening before the man *punched* a lion square in the muzzle. The force sent the beast hurtling backward, crashing into a tree with a bone-rattling *thud*. Senku's mind raced. *The petrification process strengthened our bodies to a crazy extent, sure. It's not surprising that someone already known for their strength would come back even stronger—but this…*
>
> This was on a completely different level.

The remaining lions froze, hackles raised. The man—*Tsukasa*—stood before them, eyes burning with raw, unshaken confidence. He didn't need another punch. He didn't even need to move.

His presence alone was enough to make the lions back away.

Senku almost couldn't believe his eyes.

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF HIGH SEAS AM I LOOKING AT?!" Ryusui practically *exploded*, jumping up from his seat, hands buried in his hair like he'd just witnessed a divine miracle. "Did he—did he just *punch* a lion? A *lion*?! Bare-fisted?! And it WENT FLYING?!" His eyes gleamed with something between awe and pure exhilaration. "*Why* did nobody *tell* me about this man sooner?! I would have paid anything to see this with my own eyes!"

Ukyo smirked, watching Ryusui's reaction with mild amusement. "We *did* tell you," he said casually. "You just assumed we were exaggerating."

"Well, obviously!" Ryusui huffed, throwing out his arms. "How was I supposed to believe something so *insane* without proof?! This man isn't just strong—he's a *myth*, an *actual* warrior-god! And the *lions backed down*?!" He let out a breathless laugh. "Ohh, Tsukasa, my friend, where have you *been* all my life? I want him."

Her eyes still on the lionesses who were backing away from the warrior, Kohaku scoffed, arms crossed. "Yeah, okay, well now you *definitely* can't call me 'lioness' anymore."

Gen, still grinning, turned to her. "Awww, Kohaku-chan, don't be like that."

Kohaku bristled. "H*e* just *looks* at them and they decide it's not worth it?!" She gestured wildly at the screen. "That's *cheating*! I refuse to be called after something that left after just a LOOK from him. They didn't even try."

Chrome snorted. "Oh yeah, *totally unfair*. How *dare* Tsukasa be *so scary* that even *lions* noped out."

Kohaku grumbled, sinking back into her seat. "Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous."

Meanwhile, Gen's focus had shifted. His grin lingered, but his eyes flicked toward Senku, studying his expression—or rather, the way he kept his reaction carefully measured.

It was subtle—anyone else would have missed it. But Gen wasn't just anyone.

The great Senku Ishigami, who always had an answer for everything, who never wasted a second on emotion when logic would do just fine, had *hesitated* had been *surprised* by Tsukasa's actions with the lions. Not long. Barely a breath. But Gen saw the way his fingers stilled for just half a second, the way his pupils constricted slightly before he forced himself back into analytical mode. It was rare—so *rare*—to catch Senku *reacting* before thinking.

And Gen loved rare things.

That was why he decided to poke at him. Not just because it was fun (though *of course* it was fun), but because moments like this were fleeting, and *Senku-chan* never let anyone linger on them for too long. If Gen didn't press now to tease him now, the opportunity would be gone. And—if he was being honest with himself—there was something intoxicating about watching Senku squirm under the right kind of pressure.

So, with a lazy tilt of his head and a smirk that *looked* easy but was anything but, he leaned in ever so slightly.

"You almost couldn't believe your eyes, huh, *Senku-chan*?"

The teasing lilt in his voice was deliberate. Just enough to keep Senku from brushing it off too quickly. Just enough to see how far he could push before Senku caught on.

Because as much as Gen loved *watching* rare things—he loved *creating* them even more.

Senku didn’t even blink. "Because it was impressive."

"Uh-huh." Gen’s smile widened, a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Except you don’t usually *think* like that." He tapped his temple. "Normally, that big ol’ brain of yours jumps straight to analyzing cause and effect, but *this* time—" He waggled a finger lazily in the air. "—you actually *hesitated*."

He leaned in just a fraction, enough that his voice dropped lower, softer. "Just a little. Just long enough for your *gut* reaction to slip through before your logic kicked in."

Senku exhaled, crossing his arms. "I wasn’t hesitating. I was calculating."

Gen let out a quiet chuckle, gaze flicking over Senku’s face like he was *studying* him. "Oh, of *course*, of course," he said, voice teasing but undeniably intrigued. "Still, even *you* had a moment of disbelief. It’s *very* rare to see you genuinely caught off guard, *Senku-chan*."

He let the name linger just a second too long before grinning. "I *almost* wish we had a playback of your face."

Senku scoffed, rolling his eyes. "What, so you could analyze *me* instead of Tsukasa?"

"Well," Gen mused, resting his chin in his hand, "I *do* have a preference for watching *interesting* things~."

There was a flicker of something unreadable in Senku’s eyes before he clicked his tongue and looked away. "Tch. Waste of time."

Gen simply laughed.

Ryusui, still recovering from his first look at the Primate, let out a stunned laugh. "*What* a man," he breathed. Then, after a beat—"Senku! *Why* did you let such an asset go to waste?! If

I had someone like that in my crew, I'd never let him out of my sight!"

Senku simply sighed, rotating his neck from the stiffness that the damn Mentalist put into it with his annoying teasing, "Yeah, well, *that* didn't quite work out, did it?"

Gen hummed, fingers laced together. "Ohhh, I *really* can't wait to see *that* part of the playback."

> "You can fill me in on all the details later, but… I owe you, so I'll make you this promise." The man—*Tsukasa*—spoke with unwavering certainty, his gaze still fixed on the lion he had just felled. Senku clenched a fist at his side, "So long as we are together, the two of you will not be in danger again."
>
> Tsukasa finally turned back to them, and Senku forced himself to relax—if only slightly. His mind was already calculating, processing every word, every movement.
>
> "From now on, I'll take care of the fighting."
>
> Before Senku could respond, Taiju let out a *massive* victorious yell.
>
> "WOOOOOOOH! You hear that, Senku?! We had brain and brawn, but now we've got *brute force* on the team! We're just like the *Three Musketeers*!"
>
> Senku exhaled through his nose, giving a rueful chuckle. His gaze flickered downward for just a second—*hard*, considering every instinct in his body was screaming at him not to take his eyes off their *newest ally*.
>
> "I suppose we are," he admitted, voice light but laced with something more cautious. Then, almost to himself, he added, "But I've got a nagging feeling the new guy might be a little *too* strong."

"Ahhh, *there* it is," Gen hummed, lacing his fingers together as he leaned back. "That's my *ever-so-careful* Senku-chan." His grin was light, but his eyes were sharp, watching Senku's expression like he was reading a particularly fascinating book. "Everyone else is celebrating getting a superhuman bodyguard, but *you*? You're already planning ten steps ahead. Tsk, tsk. No faith in our new musketeer?"

Senku scoffed. "Faith's got nothing to do with it. You don't leave unchecked variables lying around. That's just bad science."

Ryusui let out a low whistle. "Oho! Now *that's* the kind of thinking I like! Anyone else would see Tsukasa as a golden ticket to survival, but you're already worried about whether he's *too* much of an asset? Bold. Calculated. I love it!" He smirked. "The great Ishigami Senku doesn't trust an unshakable promise, huh?"

Senku sighed. "Trust isn't the issue. The guy *just* woke up and already wiped out a lion *bare-fisted*. I'd be an idiot if I *didn't* keep a close eye on him."

Chrome, still watching Tsukasa glare the lions into retreat, swallowed. "Yeah, okay, I get what you guys are saying, but, uh… we *really* didn't have a choice back then, right?" He looked at Senku. "Like, if you could've found someone else to revive first, *would* you?"

Senku exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "If we had time, maybe. But we *didn't*. The situation called for the strongest option. That's why I went along with it."

"But even in the middle of that, you were *still* wary," Gen mused, voice softer now, but no less intrigued.

Senku didn't answer right away.

He just shrugged. "Like I said. *Unchecked variables*."

Gen's lips curled into a knowing smile. "Mmm. *Right*."

He wouldn't push further—not yet. But *oh*, *Senku-chan*. He was just *so* transparent when he thought he wasn't.

Senku could act as pragmatic as he wanted, could frame everything as logical calculations and risk assessments, but Gen had known *plenty* of liars in his life. The best ones weren't the ones who faked emotions—they were the ones who *believed* their own reasoning so

completely that they convinced *themselves* they had no emotions at all. And Senku? He *felt* things. He just refused to acknowledge them as anything but logic.

This wasn't just about Tsukasa's strength.

It was about *control*.

Because someone like Senku didn't just distrust power. He distrusted what people *did* with it.

And Gen *knew* why.

Senku was *terrible* at leaving things in other people's hands. He could delegate tasks, sure. He could send people off with clear instructions, confident that they'd get the job done. But when it came to real, fundamental control—when the outcome of something *big* rested in someone else's hands? That was where Senku got *twitchy*. That was why he was always the one making the final calls. Why he kept his hands in *everything*, even when others were more than capable of handling it.

Because the second he *wasn't* in control, the second he had to rely on *someone else's* judgment—

That's where things got *dangerous*. Because other people made mistakes, and Senku didn't.

And Tsukasa?

Tsukasa was the *definition* of dangerous.

Not just because of his strength, though that was certainly part of it. But because he was the kind of person who *believed* in his own judgment so completely that he wouldn't hesitate to act on it. Someone with absolute conviction. Someone who, if he decided a certain path was

right, would *follow it to the end*, no matter who stood in his way. Senku had already *seen* it. Even if he hadn't put it into words yet, his instincts *knew*.

It wasn't *just* that Tsukasa was strong. It was that he was *too decisive*.

And Senku was *terrible* at trusting anyone else's decisions but his own.

Gen's gaze flicked back to him, watching the way Senku's fingers twitched ever so slightly at his side. *You already know, don't you?* he thought, lips curling into something like amusement. *You've already run every possible future scenario, haven't you?*

Oh, *Senku-chan*.

You already knew you were going to clash with him.

You just didn't know the *when* and *why* yet.

Tsukasa wanted control because he thought *he* alone knew best. That his judgment, his ideals, his strength would create the world he wanted. Senku wanted control, too. But not to shape the world in his own image. Senku's control came from *love and passion for what he did, and using that to shape the world around him.* He built, he planned, he calculated the best path forward—not for *him and his*, but for *everyone*. He didn't demand people follow him. He just made sure they *could*. And *that* was why Senku would always be the better leader.

Gen sighed to himself, shaking his head with a soft chuckle. *What a pain,* he thought. *I guess I've got no choice but to make sure you don't get yourself killed, huh, Senku-chan?*

"How could that be a bad thing?" Taiju asked.

Senku almost rolled his eyes. *Classic Taiju.* Naïve, trusting, seeing only the best-case scenario. Still, he lowered his voice, just in case the guy's hearing was stronger than he thought. The force of Tsukasa's movements had made a lot of noise—far more than their

modern forests ever had—so the chance of being overheard was slim. But Senku wasn't the type to take risks with unknown variables. If he was going to convince Taiju of the *potential* dangers, he'd need to be a little more… *heavy-handed*.

So, with calculated ease, he leaned in and dropped the bomb.

"What if it turns out he's actually some evil, homicidal, *sex-crazed*—" Senku *emphasized*, deliberately drawing out the words before *accidentally* sliding his gaze toward Yuzuriha as he spoke.

Taiju's breath hitched.

Heh. Works every time.

Senku kept going, voice low and sharp like a blade. "—wannabe tyrant? Dude's so overpowered he just *killed a lion with his bare hands.* In a world where guns haven't been invented, he'd be *ten billion percent* unstoppable."

Taiju's eyes widened, the gears in his head finally catching up to the scenario Senku had just *force-fed* him.

Senku exhaled, almost annoyed at how *easy* it had been. His brain flickered back to that stupid book on manipulation—*Asagiri Gen's* book, the one he kept "accidentally" remembering whenever he needed to convince someone of something.

It irritated him. Mostly because it *worked*.

Damned author poisoned my mind with the soft sciences, he thought irritably, unimpressed with how *annoyingly* useful it had turned out to be.

"Wha—*WAIT A SECOND*!" Taiju screamed, realizing what Senku did.

The room erupted into chaos.

"Senku," Ukyo sighed, rubbing his temples. "Did you *really* have to put it that way?"

"Oh, absolutely," Gen cut in, grinning wide. He had known, of course, because of that brief mention earlier, but to see the mention with his name next to it made it all the more real, and all the more tease worthy, "That, dear friends, was a *masterclass* in psychological warfare. So effortlessly done! So flawlessly executed! Why, it's almost like Senku-chan has been *studying* the delicate art of persuasion, wouldn't you say?"

Senku shrugged. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Yeah, it worked, but *what the hell, Senku?!*" Chrome blurted, staring at him like he'd grown another head. "Did you really have to throw in the *sex-crazed* part?! That was so specific!"

Kohaku let out an amused scoff. "I'll admit, it was effective, but wow, that was *so* underhanded."

"That's just *how* he works," Ryusui said, looking *entirely* too entertained. "Say what you will, but that was a *damn* good move. Using what your audience cares about most—*brilliant!*"

Gen was still smirking—*too* much, actually, and Senku was about to tell him to cut it out when—

"Ohhh, but the *real* highlight of today's lesson," Gen drawled, voice practically dripping with amusement, "Is that little throwaway thought Senku-chan had right *at the end*." He pressed a hand dramatically to his chest. "Ohh, what was it again? Something about—*ah!*—a certain book he once read?"

Senku's brow twitched. "Tch. It's not that deep, Mentalist."

"Not *that deep*?!" Gen cackled. "Senku-chan! You read *my* book!"

Silence.

Then, Ryusui leaned forward with interest. "*Before* the world turned to stone?"

A slow grin spread across Kohaku's face. "*Ohhh*."

Chrome’s jaw dropped. "WAIT, THAT MEANS YOU KNEW WHO GEN WAS BEFORE TSUKASA REVIVED HIM?!"

Gen's smirk faltered—only *slightly*, but enough for anyone paying attention.

"Oh, my," he mused, tilting his head *just* enough to let his bangs slip over one eye. His voice remained teasing, but there was a faint heat behind it now, something he *definitely* wasn’t about to let anyone pick up on. "And here I was, thinking we were *new* friends. Turns out you had your eye on little old me long before we ever met~."

Senku gave him a flat look. "I read a *lot* of books, Mentalist. Yours was just one of them."

"But you *remember* it," Gen pointed out, smile widening. "In fact, you remember it so *well* that it pops into your head *all the time*. Ohh, Senku-chan, are you secretly a *fan*?"

Senku clicked his tongue and looked away. "Tch. Hardly. The book was *stupidly* effective, that’s all. Plus I have perfect recall."

Gen let out a slow, thoughtful hum, studying Senku in a way that was *much* more careful than his usual playful banter.

"Well, well," he murmured, voice quieter now. "Isn’t that *interesting*?"

Senku didn’t respond.

Which, frankly, was all the response Gen needed.

"Do you guys have anything to butcher this with? A knife, or at least something sharp?"

Taiju visibly recoiled. "A-are you *thinking* about eating that thing?" His voice cracked slightly. "That's *nasty*!"

Senku let out a chuckle at the reaction, raising a hand to the side in a lazy gesture, trying to *look* far more relaxed than he actually was. "Well, it's not poisonous," he admitted. "But it's tough as hell, reeks of ammonia, and tastes *awful*."

His mind flicked back to Africa—the first time he'd tried lion meat. Maybe the Japanese diet in the area had been different enough to slightly change the flavor, but it wouldn't be *that* different. Definitely not enough to make lion taste *good*. Especially not without sauce. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers.

Taiju was still staring at him, mouth slightly open in horror. "Wait—*when the hell did you eat lion?*"

When else do you think, you oaf?

But Senku answered anyway, shrugging. "When I was in Africa doing research on Ebola."

There was a beat of silence before Taiju flailed. "I *forgot* about that! What kind of *high school kid* does that?!"

Senku just smirked. "A *really* cool one."

Ryusui let out a sharp laugh, looking entirely *too* entertained. "Ahhh, *but* the real tragedy here is that you had to eat it *badly prepared*! Francois could probably make lion taste like the finest delicacy if given the right seasonings and technique!" He sighed, shaking his head. "Senku, Senku, what a *waste* of opportunity. Did you at least pair it with the right wine?"

Senku raised an eyebrow. "I was studying Ebola, not having a five-star dining experience, Ryusui."

"Hah! And *there* was your first mistake!" Ryusui declared dramatically. "Everything in life is worth enjoying to its fullest, even survival food!"

"Yeah, okay, but *lion*, though?" Chrome looked vaguely horrified. "That's, like, an *actual predator*! Isn't there some kind of… I don't know, *rule* against eating things that eat *other* things?"

"That’s just a superstition," Senku waved him off. "Nutritionally speaking, there’s nothing wrong with eating carnivores—it’s just that their meat tends to be tougher and gamier. Basically, not worth the effort unless you *really* have to." Senku grinned broadly ad started lecture, "Okay, let’s break this down, shall we? The reason people avoid eating carnivores isn’t because of *some weird biological curse*—it’s all about *bioaccumulation*. Predators eat other animals, and if those animals contain *any* toxins, parasites, or heavy metals, those build up in the predator’s body over time."

Ukyo nodded in understanding. "Ah, kind of like how mercury accumulates in tuna?"

"Exactly!" Senku pointed at him. "Predators sit *higher* on the food chain, so they have a greater chance of storing unwanted substances in their muscles and fat. But that’s mostly a concern with *marine* predators, since a lot of pollutants come from water sources. Land predators? Not so much. The worst thing you’d get from eating a lion is *tough meat* and a potential parasite or two—easily solved if you cook it properly."

Chrome still looked hesitant. "Yeah, okay, but it still *feels* weird."

Senku rolled his eyes. "Oh, *please*. Humans are technically omnivores, and we eat other omnivores *all the time*. Chickens, pigs, *Mustela itatsi* otherwise known as weasels—"

"Wait, *people eat weasels?!*" Chrome yelped.

"*Obviously* people eat weasels," Kohaku said, unimpressed. "I’ve had weasel meat before. It’s not bad. YOU have had it before, even if you didn't know. We are part of the same village after all."

"Point is," Senku continued, ignoring the growing chaos, "There’s *nothing* biologically wrong with eating a carnivore. It’s just inefficient. Most carnivores have *less fat*, tougher muscle fibers, and way more connective tissue, which makes them *harder* to cook properly. Not to mention, they’re usually apex predators, so hunting them isn’t exactly practical."

"Ahhh," Gen hummed, smirking. "So, what you’re saying, *Senku-chan*, is that it’s *not* bad… just a huge *pain in the ass*?"

"Exactly," Senku confirmed.

Ryusui grinned. "Ahhh, but that's *only* if you don't have a good chef! Francois would *absolutely* turn lion into a dish fit for royalty!"

Senku exhaled. "Yeah, well, *Francois wasn't in Africa with me*, so I had to eat it *as is*. And trust me, it *sucked*."

"You still ate it," Kohaku pointed out, eyebrow raised.

Senku shrugged. "I *was* in Africa. Might as well take advantage of the local cuisine."

Ukyo sighed. "Only you would phrase eating *lion* like that."

Meanwhile, Gen was still grinning, fingers laced together like he was savoring something particularly amusing. "I have to say, Senku-chan, I *love* watching you break myths. And here I thought you only pulled out this much enthusiasm for *science*—but no, it seems you get just as fired up when someone challenges your personal menu history."

Senku scoffed. "It's *basic biology*, Mentalist."

"Sure, sure~," Gen sing-songed. "I just *love* that you casually threw out a first-hand review like it was common knowledge! You said that *so* confidently that if I didn't already know, I'd almost think it was normal!" He tapped his chin. "Tell me, *Senku-chan… what else* did you try in Africa?"

Senku shot him a look. "Do you really want to know?"

Gen paused. Considered. Then gave a breezy laugh. "You know what? *Probably not!*"

Chrome groaned. "Yeah, I *definitely* don't."

Kohaku smirked. "I kind of *do*."

Ryusui grinned. "I *absolutely* do."

Senku sighed, clearly regretting everything.

"Although it was attacking us, I took this noble creature's life. I want to give back to the circle of life by putting all of it to use. I owe it that much," Tsukasa stated.

He *sounded* reasonable. Logical, even. But Senku had seen that sharp look the moment Tsukasa woke up. The one that sized up the battlefield in an instant, calculating threats and assessing their situation before he'd even finished shedding stone. That wasn't the gaze of a man swept up in philosophical ideals. That was the gaze of a man who saw *everything*. And right now, Taiju was already falling into his pace.

Not good.

Senku moved toward Tsukasa, ignoring Taiju's excited claims about him *actually* being a solid dude. As he approached, Tsukasa—without even turning—extended a hand, expecting the 'sharp object' he'd requested.

Meaning that the *moment* his eyes had opened, he had already *noticed* that Senku had made such a tool.

Of course he did, Senku thought grimly.

Still, he placed the knife into Tsukasa's open palm, his own expression unreadable. "Well, the whole 'circle of life' thing doesn't move me *one millimeter*," he said flatly. "But I *do* agree about not wasting meat or resources."

Their gazes met—Tsukasa's sharp and unwavering, Senku's guarded and calculating.

Senku wasn't sure which of them would make the first move.

But he *was* sure that it was only a matter of time.

"Oho~! *Now* this is interesting," he hummed, tapping his chin, eyes flicking between the screen and Senku. "Senku-chan, I never knew you had such a *tense* dynamic with Tsukasa! That kind of *mutual understanding*… that sharp back and forth… that piercing eye contact…"

Senku *immediately* grimaced. "Don't."

"Ohhh, but I *must*," Gen continued, his grin practically sparkling. "It's just *so* intense~! The way you walked up to him, the way he *wordlessly* held out his hand because he *just knew* you had a knife—ahhh, the silent trust! The unspoken tension! *What are you two~?*"

Senku visibly recoiled. "Disgusted," he deadpanned.

Gen *cackled*.

"Ahhh, but why?" he teased, resting his chin in his hands. "Big, strong, wild-man Tsukasa, protector of the weak, self-proclaimed warrior-philosopher, *so in tune* with the cycle of life… Surely that should be appealing?"

Senku gave him the *flattest* stare possible. "Mentalist. He *punched a lion*. That's not intelligence, that's just *brute force*."

Chrome snorted. "Yeah, I mean… *cool*, but definitely not a brain-over-brawn kinda guy."

"Oh, *thank you*," Senku muttered.

Ryusui, amused, waved a hand. "A man like Tsukasa has his own *type* of intelligence, wouldn't you say? The way he assessed the battlefield instantly, his instincts, his combat awareness—"

"Not the kind that matters," Senku cut in bluntly. "If we're talking about useful intelligence, it's got nothing to do with punching power. Wrestle all the wild animals you want—that's not what builds civilization. The kind of intelligence that actually matters is the ability to adapt. To outthink problems instead of brute-forcing through them. You need someone who can read situations Not to mention, creativity. If you're rebuilding civilization from scratch, you don't just need facts—you need someone who can apply knowledge in unexpected ways, think on their feet, use whatever's available to stay five steps ahead."

Gen's smirk widened slightly, eyes glinting. "Ohhh, *is that so*~?"

Senku didn't like that tone. He *really* didn't like that tone.

Gen tilted his head, studying him with far too much amusement. "So~ you prefer the kind of intelligence that can *build civilization*, huh?" He tapped his chin. "The *mental* kind of strength, not the *physical*… the kind that keeps up with *your* thinking… Fascinating, fascinating~."

Senku exhaled sharply. "You're reading way too much into this, Mentalist."

"Ohhh, am I?" Gen sing-songed, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "I mean, we all have *preferences*, don't we~?"

Senku leveled him with a glare. "I *prefer* practical applications of intelligence, not brute force, because that's what *matters* in a world like this." He crossed his arms. "This isn't some prehistoric era where survival depends on who can hit hardest. We're rebuilding civilization from scratch. And civilization is built on *brains*, not brawn."

"Ohhh~," Gen drawled, pressing a finger to his lips. He already knew of course, but to poke at Senku for it? Irresistible, "So *brains* are what interest you most, hmm?"

Senku *froze*. Just for a fraction of a second. But Gen *caught it*.

Senku rolled his eyes. "I'm done with this conversation."

"But *I'm not*," Gen grinned.

But before Gen could continue, Kohaku crossed her arms. "As funny as this is, I *do* think Senku's got a point. Tsukasa might be *aware* of his surroundings, but I wouldn't call him *clever* the way Senku and Gen are."

Ukyo nodded. "Instinct and intelligence are two very different things. Tsukasa's dangerous because he *acts* without hesitation. Senku is dangerous because he *thinks* before he acts."

"Exactly," Senku said. "There's no tension, no back-and-forth. Just me watching him like I would any other *potentially lethal animal*."

Gen pouted dramatically. "No chemistry, huh?"

Senku gave him a long look. "Negative chemistry."

"Like, *opposite ends of the periodic table* negative?" Chrome asked, amused.

Senku nodded. "We repel on an atomic level. Ten billion percent."

After the butchering, they dragged the haul back to camp. Even with the obvious risks of bringing a fresh kill so close to their shelter, Senku's mind was already working through solutions. With Tsukasa around, securing *protein* became a much more realistic goal. If Senku set up a smoker, they could preserve meat properly—giving them a buffer of at least one to two weeks' worth of food. *That* would make a world of difference. Protein was exactly what his body needed to start recovering from the *stupidly long* stretch of starvation he'd put himself through.

Alright, might as well make use of this guy while he's here, Senku thought, running through calculations on how best to maximize their new "asset."

They reached the clearing.

"You guys did all of this yourselves?" Tsukasa asked, surveying the camp. His sharp gaze swept over the makeshift structures, pausing at the most unexpected sight. "Huh… even a *laboratory*?"

Senku barely turned his head, still rifling through one of his pouches, mentally adjusting all his *backup* plans now that Tsukasa was in the mix.

"I'm Shishio Tsukasa. Just call me Tsukasa," the man said, extending a hand for a shake.

Senku didn't bother looking up. "I guess family names don't mean much in this world," he said absently, his focus elsewhere. "I'm Senku—the brainy one behind all our scientific advancements. Taiju, the simple one, handles the grunt work."

Thankfully, Taiju took the handshake, because Senku had *zero* intention of doing so himself.

His mind kept whirring, layers of thoughts running parallel. Calculations. Contingencies. Solutions. *If* Tsukasa stuck around, a smoker was priority one. *If* Tsukasa turned into a problem, then… well. Senku always had a few safeguards in mind. He answered Tsukasa's questions half-heartedly, words spilling from his mouth automatically while his brain worked on something entirely different. Numbers and blueprints overlapped in the back of his mind. His passive counting never stopped—it hadn't stopped for a long time.

He said something about their food situation, barely processing his own words as his focus shifted toward designing a trigger mechanism—

"You won't have to survive on just that soon enough," Tsukasa cut in smoothly. "I'm here now."

Senku's eyes flicked up for just a fraction of a second.

And then, without a word, he went right back to planning.

Taiju blinked. "Wait—*what?*" His head whipped toward Senku so fast it was a miracle he didn't strain something. "*These thoughts are crazy!* I didn't know you were THAT suspicious."

Senku sighed. "Obviously."

Taiju's jaw dropped. "*No*, not 'obviously'! You never *said* anything! I thought we were all getting along for the most part!"

Senku exhaled like Taiju had just missed a painfully simple math problem. *"Oaf, He punched a lion."*

Taiju hesitated. "…Okay, *fair*, but—" He frowned, rubbing the back of his head. "I mean, he *seemed* like a good guy! He was nice! He helped us!"

"And *that*," Senku said dryly, "Was exactly why I was suspicious."

Kohaku scoffed, arms crossed. "You *would* be. Not wrong, though."

"Seriously, Taiju, *how* did you not notice?" Ukyo asked, raising an eyebrow. "Senku wasn't exactly subtle."

Taiju waved his hands in frustration. "Because I was *living it*! I was right there! You think I was paying attention to subtle little eye twitches when we were dragging a *lion* back to camp?! I was busy making sure we *survived*!"

"To be fair," Chrome piped up, "Taiju's always been kinda bad at picking up stuff like that."

"Hey!... Well I guess that's true!" Taiju started to protest, before falling into a laugh.

Meanwhile, Gen was watching Senku with a lazy smirk. "Ahhh, but *now* it all makes sense. No wonder Senku-chan was so distracted."

Senku shot him a flat look. "I was making plans. Because *that's what I do*."

Gen tapped his fingers together. "Mmm. But not just any plans. *Backup* plans. You were already thinking about *contingencies* the moment Tsukasa entered the picture, weren't you~?"

Senku didn’t answer.

Which, of course, was an answer in itself.

Ryusui let out a low whistle. "Hah! So while Taiju was busy bonding and bringing home the kill, Senku was already calculating how to take down the strongest man in the world *just in case*."

Senku huffed. "It’s called *thinking ahead*. Maybe you should try it sometime."

Chrome nudged Taiju. "See? This is why Senku’s the brain and you’re the brawn."

Taiju groaned. "I *get it*, okay?! I was *too trusting*! But man, this is weird—Tsukasa was really that suspicious to you?"

"Of course he was," Kohaku said, unimpressed. "Any guy that strong, that *calm*, that fast to *assess everything* the moment he wakes up? *No one* is that naturally put together. The fact that he acted like it was nothing? That’s a red flag."

Senku nodded. "Exactly."

Gen hummed. "Mmm, so~ if I’m understanding correctly… Senku-chan, you weren’t just keeping an eye on Tsukasa. You were actively *studying* him, weren’t you?"

Senku waved a hand dismissively. "I study *everything*."

"Yes, yes, but not *everything* makes you *this* twitchy," Gen teased, eyes gleaming. It would be fun if he could get Senku to admit to that little control issue he had been thinking/theorizing about earlier. "You were watching for specific reactions, weren’t you~?"

Senku gave him a deadpan look. "I *was* watching for any signs of danger, yes. That's *what you do* when a random guy built like a tank shows up in your survival scenario."

Yeah, this guy was *insanely* strong. Faster than the boars he hunted, quick enough to snatch birds out of the air with a glance, and precise enough to spear multiple fish in a single motion without *any* hesitation. Senku watched, analyzing. Tsukasa didn't hesitate. Not once. Every movement was fluid, effortless, controlled. Senku had been counting variables since the moment he woke up, but something about *this*—about watching Tsukasa operate so efficiently—made him recalculate *again*.

For now, a makeshift smoker would do. He set up a post over the fire, gathering the fish. Tsukasa said nothing, just *watched* as Senku worked.

And Senku was *very aware* of being watched.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

"Oh! I get it!" Taiju exclaimed, snapping Senku out of his thoughts. "If you cook the food right away, it won't go bad!"

Senku shook his head. "I'm *not* cooking these fish." He gestured toward the rising smoke. "I'm using the aldehydes in the smoke to kill microbes. In words your feeble brain can understand—I'm *smoking* them."

Taiju nodded eagerly. "Ohhh! So with me and Senku working together, we should have *tons* of preserved food!"

Senku rolled his shoulders, then cracked his neck—*damn* leftover stone. "This is the first step toward civilization."

Taiju blinked. "Wait, *we're still on step zero?!*"

Senku exhaled. "Obviously."

Nearby, Tsukasa had stepped away, his gaze distant. Senku tracked him carefully, watching as he walked toward something in the grass. A sharp *crack* split the air as Tsukasa *punched a rock* into pieces. Senku's muscles tensed instinctively, eyes narrowing. A petrified person had come into view. Tsukasa didn't hesitate—just shattered the stone encasing them with another precise strike.

Taiju cheered like they had just won a prize. "WOOOAH! Tsukasa, you're *amazing*!"

Senku's expression remained unreadable as he glanced toward the man in question, then back to Taiju's starry-eyed excitement. Dryly, he shrugged. "*I guess* it's like having a superhero on our team, huh?"

But his brain was already spinning. Because a *superhero* was only as good as the *cause* he chose to fight for. And Senku wasn't convinced that Tsukasa's cause would align with his.

"WOOOOAH!!" Taiju exclaimed, practically *vibrating* in his seat. "I *forgot* how cool that was! He just—*boom!*—shattered that thing like it was *nothing*!"

Kohaku scoffed. "Sure, if 'cool' means 'completely ridiculous.' I still think it's *insane* that he can break solid rock with his bare hands."

Ryusui grinned. "No, no—*this* is exactly the kind of man I like to see! Strength, confidence, *decisiveness*—I *love* it!" He crossed his arms, looking approvingly at the screen. "A man like that? That's *pure* power! I want him, shame he is on ice right now.

Senku snorted. "*He is fascinating.*"

That caught their attention.

Chrome blinked. "Wait, huh? I thought you didn't *like* brute strength?"

"I don't," Senku replied smoothly, fingers laced together, elbows propped on his knees. "But *power*, Chrome, *power* is a different story."

The way he said it sent a *small* chill down a few spines.

"Here we go," Gen murmured, looking *way* too entertained.

Senku's lips curled *just* slightly at the corner, his voice dropping into something almost *too* pleased. "Tsukasa is an *asset*. A walking, breathing *force multiplier*. His kind of power is

primitive, sure—but applied *correctly*?" His fingers tapped lightly against each other. "Now *that* is something interesting. Shame he's too much of a *wild card* for that. Too *instinct-driven*. But that doesn't mean I can't *study* him."

Gen whistled. "Oho~! There it is! That *classic* Ishigami Senku 'I want to take this apart and see how it ticks' energy."

Kohaku shook her head. "You really *are* an evil scientist sometimes."

The scientist in question just grinned unashamedly, letting out little snickers.

Chrome leaned forward. "Okay, but real talk—what *was* going through your head when you saw that? Like, when he actually *punched a rock*?"

"That I should be careful about leaving *anything* breakable around him. Well, that, and how much force he'd need to shatter something like that *on impact*—assuming a typical rock density, and given the angle of his strike, plus the lack of visible damage to *his own hand*—"

"Oh my *God*," Chrome groaned.

Taiju sighed. "You really *were* running numbers on him, weren't you?"

"Of course," Senku said, matter-of-fact. "I run numbers on *everything*."

As if they were *that* lucky.

Besides, Senku had a few *hypotheses* that needed testing on their *new guest*—and a few *ingredients* to smooth over different backup plans. For now, they sat around the fire, stomachs full, the warmth flickering against their faces. Senku leaned forward, lacing his fingers together. "Alright, time for a *fun* little pop quiz. For a *technological civilization*, what's the *most* important component to have? The right answer gets you ten billion points."

Taiju squinted, deep in thought, and Senku already knew—just *knew*—the big oaf was about to say something *absolutely ridiculous*.

"Well…" Taiju muttered, his brain *clearly* working overtime, "It's gotta be something *techie*…"

A pause.

Then—

"*Smartphones!*"

Senku stared.

He felt something inside him *snap*.

Does this absolute oaf think we can just pull tech out of our asses?! His expression twisted into the *most* exaggerated grin he had ever given in his life. "Ohhh *yeah*, *smartphones* would be *great*—" And then, *immediately*, he dropped the act. His eyes narrowed, voice sharp as he jabbed an accusatory finger at Taiju, "*Yeah, right!* We're not *jumping* literally *ten billion years* into the future, *dumbass*!"

Gen *burst out laughing*.

"*PFFFFT*— OH, *THIS* IS RICH!" He practically collapsed onto the table, cackling. "Senku-chan, *you*—you absolute *hypocrite*! You dragged Taiju for that answer, and then—AND THEN—you *actually built a damn phone*!"

Kohaku crossed her arms, smirking. "Wow. So *he* was right all along, huh?"

Senku scowled. "No, he *wasn't*."

"But you *made* a phone," Chrome pointed out, barely holding back his own laughter.

Senku groaned. "*A primitive radio transceiver is NOT the same as a smartphone!* You *cannot* compare them!"

"Ohhh, but Senku-chan," Gen wheezed, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, "That's *exactly* what makes this so *hilarious*! You shot him down *so hard*—and then a few months later, you were like, 'Well, time to make a phone.'"

Ryusui grinned. "I *love* this. You were so busy being *offended* by the idea, and yet you *still* ended up making it happen."

Senku clicked his tongue. "*Out of necessity!* We needed a long-distance communication system to coordinate operations! *Of course* communication is one of the most important advancements in human history—*but that's not the point!*" He jabbed a finger at Taiju. "You didn't say *radio*, you said *smartphones*—like I could just whip one up out of thin air! Like I had *cell towers* and *satellites* at my disposal! Do you have *any* idea how much infrastructure we'd need before we even get close to that?"

Taiju blinked. "Uh… a *lot*?"

"*A LOT*," Senku repeated, exasperated. "And that's why I *roasted* you, dumbass! It's not about whether communication is important—it's that you jumped straight to *modern-day consumer electronics* like we weren't still chiseling rocks two months ago!"

Gen *wheezed* with laughter. "Ohoho~! I *love* this! So, what you're saying is, you *weren't* mad about the answer itself, you were mad that Taiju *phrased it in the dumbest way possible*?"

"YES!" Senku groaned. "Thank you, Mentalist. *For once*, you understand."

Gen grinned. "Ohh, don't worry, Senku-chan. I *always* understand~."

Late to the party, but putting the pieces together, Taiju's eyes lit up. "W-wait… so does that mean…?"

Senku *immediately* pointed at him. "*Do not* finish that thought."

Taiju grinned *so* wide. "*Does that mean I was right?!*"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT! Did you listen a word I just said, you oaf?" Senku snapped.

"But—but I *was*!" Taiju practically vibrated with excitement. "I said *smartphones* were the most important thing, and a few months later, you made a *phone*! *I won the quiz, Senku!* I *win*!"

Senku *buried his face in his hands*. "I *hate* all of you."

Gen leaned in, still *beaming*. "Ohhh, no, Senku-chan, this is *karma*. Ten billion percent."

"Negative one billion percent," Senku muttered.

"Ohhh, you wound me~." Gen grinned, nudging his shoulder. "So, tell me, do I get *extra* points if I guess what our *next* ten-billion-year leap is going to be~?"

Senku exhaled, glaring at the screen as if it had personally betrayed him.

Chrome snickered. "C'mon, Senku. Admit it. Taiju *kinda* called it."

Senku lifted his head just enough to glare at him. "I refuse."

"Ohhh, this is *never* gonna get old," Gen mused, positively *delighted*.

And, judging by the way *everyone* was still looking at him, Senku *knew* he wasn't going to live this down anytime soon.

Their *new friend* had a smarter idea than Taiju, at least. "Maybe… *iron*?"

Senku *would* have been glad that Tsukasa at least had *half* a brain—if the *vibes* weren't so completely *off*.

"Iron's *pretty* important," he admitted, eyeing Tsukasa carefully, "B*ut not at this stage*. There's something far more crucial. *Calcium carbonate.*"

"Of course!" Taiju exclaimed, all too happy. "Once again, I have *absolutely no idea* what you're saying!"

Senku barely held back a sigh. Once again, Tsukasa stepped in, "You mean *lime*."

"*One billion points to Tsukasa!*" Senku announced mockingly, throwing up his hands. "Now let's put it in terms that even a *brain-dead oaf* like Taiju can understand: It's the stuff they use to mark athletic fields."

He bent down and picked up a shell, turning it over in his hand. "*You know,*" he said, giving Taiju a pointed look, "*these things you've been using to shave your big oaf face?* If we take these shells and pulverize them into powder, we'll have *plenty* of calcium carbonate in no time."

Taiju gasped, eyes widening with sudden, dramatic realization. "*OH!* I *do* know that stuff!"

Senku sighed. "Yeah. Took you *long enough*."

And just like that, Taiju was *off*, moving at *full speed* with his usual endless enthusiasm, hauling in baskets upon baskets of shells like his life depended on it. By the time a day had passed, Taiju had already created *bags* of the crushed stuff. Senku watched, arms crossed, shaking his head just slightly. Even after all these years, the big oaf was *still* as ridiculous as ever. And still just as *damn* impressive.

Ryusui frowned. "Iron? Huh. I wouldn't have thought of that."

Ukyo nodded. "Same. It makes *sense*, but I wouldn't have jumped to it first."

"Yeah, but calcium carbonate is the real *big brain* answer," Chrome added, rubbing his chin. "I mean, it *is* the foundation for, like, a ton of civilization-building stuff. But still, Tsukasa guessing iron right off the bat?" He turned to Senku. "That's actually kinda smart, isn't it?"

Senku exhaled through his nose. "It was *fine*."

Gen smirked. "Ohhh, but Senku-chan, you *hate* giving out compliments, don't you?"

"I *just* said it was fine," Senku muttered.

Ryusui grinned. "Admit it—Tsukasa *was* sharper than you expected."

Senku huffed, folding his arms. Glad that at least Gen was going back to the *attraction* angle between him and Tsukasa at the very least, "He's not *stupid*—he's *observant*. He's *adaptive*. Those are two different things. It's not like he *studied* metallurgy. He just *understood* that metal is important because of his background. Anyone who's *seen* weapons up close would know iron is a big deal."

Ukyo tilted his head. "That's still pretty impressive. Most people wouldn't think about resources on a large scale like that."

Gen hummed thoughtfully. "Mmm~ and yet, Senku-chan wasn't *half* as impressed as he was *annoyed*."

Senku clicked his tongue. "*Obviously*. I don't *trust* him. For example, if he was like Taiju that would have been fine. He's *too dumb to be dangerous*."

"HEY!" Taiju protested.

"Case in point," Senku muttered.

Kohaku snickered. "To be fair, that was one of your *better* moments, Taiju. You went from 'no idea what that is' to 'hauling in an entire *warehouse's* worth of shells' in a day. Even *I*

can admit that was impressive."

"Right?!" Taiju beamed. "I mean, I *did* get a billion points!"

Senku rolled his eyes. "You got one billion *pity* points."

"*Still counts!*" Taiju grinned.

Meanwhile, Gen had a thoughtful look on his face as he twirled a lock of hair between his fingers. "*But*, Senku-chan, back to the point—don't you think it's a *little* fascinating that Tsukasa even considered iron in the first place? I mean, you're always going on about how most people don't think about *how* civilization is built, but Tsukasa's first instinct was to consider *resources*."

Senku narrowed his eyes slightly. "Which means he was already thinking about how to build *something*."

The room went quiet for a second.

Kohaku crossed her arms. "Well. That's *ominous*."

Senku shrugged. "I knew from the start he wasn't just some random guy. *No one* wakes up after thousands of years and instantly starts thinking about *how to rebuild the world* unless they've already got *some kind of vision* for what that world *should* look like."

Gen's lips curled. "Ohhh, and *that* is why you weren't impressed, huh? Because it wasn't just a *smart* answer—it was an *agenda*."

Senku smirked. "*Now* you're getting it."

"This stuff gets me *really* excited," Senku said, smirking as he held up a handful of crushed shells. "Check it out—there are four *super* useful things we can do with it."

He ticked off each point with his fingers. "First is *agriculture*. We can use it to neutralize hydrogen ions in the soil, which means a *massive* upgrade for farmland. Second—*construction*. Heat it up, mix it with sand, and you get *mortar*. Not as refined as cement, but good enough to build *houses* and *furnaces*. Third—*hygiene*. Take calcium carbonate from seaweed, blend it with oil, and the reaction makes *soap*. This world is *brutal*—getting sick means *game over*, but a little chunk of *germ-destroying science*?" Senku tossed the shell into the air and caught it with a grin. "That's a *lifesaver* in a world without doctors."

He rubbed his fingers together, testing the soap he had just created, analyzing the texture, noting whether the oil ratio needed tweaking. *Not bad, but I can refine it further.*

"And finally?" His smirk widened. "You can *call it*—Doctor *Stone*."

"I have to hand it to you, Senku. You're *pretty* amazing," Tsukasa said.

Senku barely glanced up, but he *did* notice the way Tsukasa's eyes lingered—not just observing, but *studying*. He didn't like it.

Tsukasa continued, voice smooth. "You freed me in the middle of a *lion attack*, but you stayed *calm*, explained things clearly. I've never met anyone like you before. You truly have my *respect*."

Senku *still* didn't like the look in his eyes.

"Ohhh, wow," Gen murmured, tapping his fingers together. His usual smirk was notably absent, replaced with something far more calculating. "I understand *completely* that there's no interest on *your* side, Senku-chan, but…"

His eyes flicked to Senku, studying his expression carefully.

"It *does* seem like Tsukasa was *very* interested in you."

Senku groaned immediately, rubbing his temples. "Mentalist. *No.*"

Gen hummed. "Ohhh, *yes*."

Ryusui leaned forward, grinning. "Oh? Now *this* is fascinating! So *that's* why he was so fixated on you. It wasn't just admiration—it was *personal*."

"I *don't* think it was *that* kind of interest," Senku said flatly.

"But *you don't know for sure*," Gen countered.

Senku exhaled sharply. "I *know* that he was assessing my *usefulness*, not trying to *woo* me, Mentalist."

"That's what *you* were assessing," Ukyo pointed out, amused. "I'm not so sure that was *all* he was thinking."

Kohaku smirked, arms crossed. "I mean, look at the way he was watching you. That wasn't just 'oh, this guy is smart.' That was 'I'm going to *study* this person because I like what I see.'"

Chrome blinked. "Wait, *what*?" He turned toward the screen, looking back at Tsukasa's expression. "Ohhh *man*, yeah, I *see* it now. That's kinda intense."

Taiju, meanwhile, looked utterly lost. "*Wait*, wait, wait—hold on—are you guys saying Tsukasa *liked* Senku? Like, *liked-liked*?"

"Not necessarily," Ukyo said, "but he was definitely *drawn* to him."

"Power is attractive," Ryusui added, grinning. "And intelligence? *Now that* is a different kind of power entirely. I wouldn't be surprised if Tsukasa felt *some* kind of pull toward you, Senku."

Senku huffed. "Yeah, well, I wasn't *interested* in the slightest."

"Ohhh, that part is *painfully* obvious," Gen mused, resting his chin in his hands, eyes practically *glowing* with amusement. "I bet if Tsukasa *had* been into you, it must've been *agonizing* for him—falling for a *scientist* who believed in the *exact opposite* of his worldview. Think about it~! Here's this *big, strong, idealistic warrior*, freshly revived, looking at civilization like a *blank slate*, thinking, *Ah, yes, now I can finally shape the world the way it was meant to be!*"

His grin widened as he leaned in toward Senku.

"And *then* he meets *you*, Senku-chan. A *tiny* little scientist, full of *science* and *skepticism* and *technology*—who, in *Tsukasa's* mind, probably represents *everything* that ruined the world in the first place! But, oh no—he *respects* you. He *likes* you. He can't *ignore* you. And that *kills him* inside, because no matter how much he *wants* to reject the old world, there's you, standing there, *brilliant*, impossible to dismiss, embodying everything he's trying to *fight against*!"

Gen clutched his chest dramatically. "It's *tragic*~! Star-crossed rivals! Opposites fated to clash! A doomed intellectual romance, one-sided and *miserable*!" He sighed, shaking his head. "*Ahh, Tsukasa, poor thing. It was never going to work out.*"

Senku *looked like he wanted to die*.

"Mentalist," he said slowly, "S*hut up*."

Gen *beamed*. "Nooo, no, this is *fun*! Let me have this!"

"No."

"Ohhh, but Senku-chan, don't you *see*? It's the *perfect psychological drama*! Tsukasa was probably *fascinated* by you! Maybe even *drawn* to you! But deep down, he *knew*—he *knew*

—that it was never going to work, because you'd *never* see the world the way he did!"

Ryusui laughed. "Damn, Gen, you're really running with this, huh?"

"Oh, I'm *thriving* right now," Gen confirmed.

"Gen," Senku said, voice flat, "Y*ou're insufferable.*"

Gen smiled *way* too innocently. "I'm just speculating~."

Kohaku chuckled. "Honestly, I *almost* feel bad for the guy. He picked the one person in the world who would *never* reciprocate."

Chrome scratched his head. "Man, this makes everything weird, though. Like, was he really *that* into Senku's brain, or was it more like… I don't know, admiration with extra steps?"

Senku groaned again. "It *doesn't matter* because *I don't care*."

Gen's eyes twinkled with mischief, but his voice remained thoughtful. "Ohhh, but it *does* matter, Senku-chan. Because whether or not you *cared*—Tsukasa definitely *did*."

Senku *hated* that. He *hated* the way Gen could dig into things like this and twist them into something bigger.

And, worst of all—

He *really* hated that Gen was probably right.

Senku didn’t believe a *word* of it.

"For at least the last ten billion years or so, almost without exception, when a man *praises* another to his face, he’s either *flirting* or *scheming*," he said flatly. "So what are you getting at?"

His own tone registered in his ears—blunt, sharp-edged, maybe even a little *angry*. And maybe… maybe he *was* angry. Over three thousand years of waiting, only to wake up and have this man *scheming* on their asses? It was exhausting. Senku didn’t *think* he would ever have *preferred* to be flirted with—but here they were.

"It’s not like that," Tsukasa claimed, his voice *calm*. Too *calm*.

And yet—Senku *saw* the pause before he answered. The fraction of a second where something unreadable flickered behind his eyes.

"I’m really not doing either of those things," Tsukasa continued, smooth as ever. "I was just thinking… if there was *anyone* who could rebuild modern civilization from scratch, it would be you."

A slight tilt of his head. A careful, measured smile.

"Yeah," he added, as if the words had just occurred to him. "That’s all I was trying to say."

Senku’s jaw tensed.

Yeah, right, I don't believe that, not one millimeter.

Chrome was the first to completely *lose it*. "OH MY *GOD*—SENKU, YOU CAN’T BE *SERIOUS*!" He *wheeze-laughed*, practically *falling* backward.

Kohaku snorted. "For someone who claims to be a genius, you *really* didn’t think that one through, huh?"

"*PFFT*— Ohhh, *Senku-chan*," Gen *cackled*, gripping his stomach. "This is *beautiful*! You *just* spent the last twenty minutes insisting Tsukasa wasn’t interested in you, but now—*now*—you’re over here stating, *as an undeniable fact*, that when a man praises another to his face, he’s either *flirting* or *scheming*!"

He wiped a dramatic fake tear. "*Ohhh, the irony~!*"

Senku groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "For the love of science—*don't start*."

"Ohhh, but Senku, we *must* start!" Ryusui *grinned*, looking far too entertained. "Because *by your own logic*, Tsukasa was either *flirting* with you… or *scheming* on you!"

"Guess which one you *just* spent an hour trying to deny?" Ukyo added, smirking.

Taiju blinked, realization finally *smacking* him in the face. "*OH!* Wait—*WAIT*—does that mean Tsukasa *was*—"

Senku *slammed* his hands onto the table. "*I MISSPOKE!*"

The laughter still rang in the room, but Senku barely heard it, his mind already running in overdrive.

Why was this *so* irritating? Not the teasing—that was *always* irritating—but the *idea* itself. The *idea* that Tsukasa could have looked at him—at *him*—and felt something even *remotely* like attraction. The thought made something coil tight in his stomach. Because it was *disgusting*. Not in the childish, surface-level *ew, romance* way. Senku had long since discarded any naïve aversion to relationships as just another variable in human behavior. He didn't *care* about love or attraction, but he understood it logically.

And *logically*, Tsukasa being into him? That was *wrong*. It was *fundamentally incompatible*.

Tsukasa wasn't just some guy with a different opinion about the world—he was someone who actively stood against everything Senku believed in. He was *exactly* the kind of person Senku couldn't stand—someone who looked at knowledge, at *advancement*, at the entire progression of civilization itself, and said, *No. We should go backward instead.* And *that* kind of person? Looking at him with admiration? With *interest*? Senku's hands clenched into fists on the table. It was revolting. Like a caveman trying to claim ownership over fire, like an anti-vaxxer trying to praise a scientist for "realizing" the dangers of modern medicine.

Like a contradiction so offensively stupid it made his brain *itch*.

But the more he tried to shove the thought aside, the more something *else* started nagging at him.

Because for a while—just for a little while—he had actually *thought* they were friends. That part was what really *sucked*. Because when he had frozen Tsukasa, it had felt *genuine*. Like, after all the fighting, all the conflict, all the ways they had been completely *at odds*, they had finally reached a point where they could *trust* each other. That was real, wasn't it? But if Tsukasa had *felt something else* that whole time—if this whole thing had been laced with *that kind* of interest instead—then *what was real and what wasn't?*

That thought alone made Senku's stomach churn.

Because it *wasn't fair*.

It wasn't fair that Senku had finally, *finally* let his guard down—had *let himself think* that maybe, just maybe, Tsukasa *wasn't* a total lost cause—only to find out that *maybe* there had been some ulterior motive all along. Senku grit his teeth. Like hell he was going to let Gen—or *anyone*—convince him that there was even the *slightest* truth to this.

Gen was still laughing—until he *wasn't*. Because something in Senku's voice—just a flicker of genuine *frustration*—made him pause. It wasn't *real* anger. Gen *knew* Senku well enough to tell the difference. But it was enough to make him realize they might be laying it on *a little too thick*. Gen exhaled, rolling his shoulders back with a grin that was *just* a bit more relaxed now. "Alright, alright, let's not fry Senku-chan's much needed brain cells over this. We've had our fun."

Kohaku raised an eyebrow. "You're the *last* person I expected to call off the teasing, Gen."

Gen smiled, tapping his temple. "Well, *unlike* Senku-chan, I *do* know when to stop *poking the bear~*."

Senku muttered something under his breath, but his shoulders *did* drop ever so slightly, tension easing.

Taiju came in, dropping a bundle of materials in front of them, completely breaking the tense moment, "So *this* is what you gotta do to build a civilization, huh?"

"That's right," Senku agreed, though he knew he sounded *put out*. He wasn't made for this *political machination* bullshit. The posturing, the half-truths, the layers of manipulation—he *hated* it. He preferred things he could quantify. He preferred being *straight up*—problems that could be solved with **science**, not social maneuvering. But if Tsukasa wanted to give him time to *prepare* for the inevitable fallout, well…

Senku wouldn't say no to that.

"One step at a time," he continued, forcing himself to focus. "The journey's a slow one, that's for sure. But we keep getting closer."

Taiju scratched his head. "Hey, so what was that *fourth* thing? You said there were four uses for the seashells, but you only told us about three."

Senku's stomach *dropped*. Taiju *always* had his rare moments of perception at the *worst possible times*.

"No," Senku corrected smoothly, tilting his head. "There were only three. I said three earlier, didn't I?"

Taiju blinked, then laughed it off. "Oh! Guess I misheard, then!"

Senku said nothing. That night, he finished crafting *one* weapon. And he hoped—*really* hoped—it wouldn't come to using it.

Ryusui let out a short laugh. "Oh, *definitely* a lie."

Kohaku crossed her arms. "A bad one, too. I can't believe *Taiju* of all people almost caught him slipping."

"I *knew* I wasn't crazy!" Taiju exclaimed, fists on his hips. "I *totally* remember him saying four!"

Chrome frowned, looking between the screen and Senku. "So… what *was* the fourth thing?"

Ukyo's expression remained unreadable. "A weapon."

Senku sighed through his nose. "Obviously."

The room went quiet.

Senku didn't answer immediately, and that silence alone made Ukyo's gaze sharpen. Ukyo had always prided himself on reading people. He listened to voices, to breathing patterns, to the little unconscious cues that gave a person away. And Senku? Senku sounded *tired*. Not just physically. Not just in that *you idiots are exhausting* kind of way. But *mentally*. This wasn't the Senku who barked orders with unwavering confidence. This wasn't even the Senku who bantered and played along with their antics just to keep the peace.

Ukyo's voice softened. "You really *didn't* want to fight him, did you?"

Senku exhaled through his nose, rubbing the back of his head. "Yeah, well. We don't always get what we want."

Ukyo studied him for another long moment, then leaned back with a thoughtful nod. "That's fair."

The next day, they were back at the beach.

Taiju rushed around, hauling baskets of seashells back to camp, his boundless energy never fading. Tsukasa was half in the water, having spent the morning fishing, but now he had stopped. He stood, gaze drifting across the shoreline, voice light as he started to talk. Senku had a *bad feeling*. And it was getting *worse*. He just continued to hope that, for once, he was *wrong*.

"We have so much freedom in this Stone World," Tsukasa mused. "No one is around to claim that the seashells are their personal property."

Senku might've pointed out that *no one really did that in the modern world either*, at least not often—

But he stayed silent.

Tsukasa continued.

"Or the ocean. Or the land."

His voice had an odd weight to it now—like something bitter curling beneath the surface.

"A long time ago, there was a poor boy whose little sister was undergoing surgery. He wanted to make something for her—to help her feel better. She loved *The Little Mermaid*, so he decided to collect seashells to make her a necklace," Tsukasa's eyes stayed on the water, distant. "But along came a man who owned the fishing rights to that part of the beach. He reeked of booze. The boy thought he was just *collecting shells*—but the man? He saw *theft*."

His hands clenched at his sides.

"He *hit* the boy. Accused him of stealing. And then he *beat him so badly* he was almost unrecognizable."

Senku's fingers twitched.

Tsukasa inhaled slowly. "He never got to give his sister that necklace."

The waves lapped at the shore. The wind carried the salty scent of the ocean.

"Hah," Ryusui exhaled, shaking his head. "*Now* I get it."

Everyone turned toward him.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his usual grin absent. "I didn't know much about Tsukasa before this. Just that he was some kind of *King of the Stone World* before I came along. A warrior, a fighter, a man who decided *he* had the right to pick and choose who got to live in this new world." His gaze flicked back to the screen. "But *this*? This tells me everything I need to know."

Senku raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? And what's that?"

Ryusui smirked, but it lacked his usual arrogance. "*He's weak.*"

That got a reaction.

"Ryusui," Ukyo warned, but Ryusui held up a hand.

"Listen, I *get* it, alright? I understand how people like him think. He suffered. He was powerless. He saw a world that chewed up and spat out people who didn't have enough wealth or status to fight back, and when he finally got *his* chance, he swore he'd never be weak again." His fingers drummed against his leg. "But here's the thing. He never actually *got stronger*—he just *ran away* from reality. He decided the whole world was to blame for his suffering instead of the *actual bastard* who hurt him. And instead of using his strength to change the system, he decided to tear it down and replace it with his *own*."

His eyes sharpened. "That's *not* strength. That's just selfishness with extra steps."

Senku snorted. "Yeah. No argument here."

Ryusui leaned back with a grin, but his expression was still thoughtful. "If he were really as strong as he thinks he is, he wouldn't have needed to erase civilization to feel powerful. He could have *ruled* it. He could have *owned* it, protected the people who mattered. Greed is justice. Instead, he just made sure no one else could have it either."

Ukyo studied him. "You really do think differently, don't you?"

"Of course I do," Ryusui scoffed. "Tsukasa and I? We both want power. The difference is, I want *everyone* to have it. I want a world where *everyone* can chase their greed, where the *only* limit is how much you're willing to work for it." He gestured toward the screen. "But him? He doesn't want a world where people *rise*. He wants a world where no one stands above him at all."

There was another pause, this one less heavy—more *settled*.

Senku smirked. "You really *do* love the sound of your own voice, huh?"

Ryusui laughed, some of his usual flair returning. "Naturally! But for once, I was actually saying something *worth* listening to."

Chrome shook his head. "Man. You really *hate* the way he thinks, huh?"

"Hate?" Ryusui hummed. "Not quite. I just don't respect it. A man like that, with *that much strength*, with *that much ability*—and *this* was the best he could come up with? What a *waste*. Don't worry though, I'll make use of him when I finally hire him."

Kohaku huffed, crossing her arms. "Well, if nothing else, you've got a *better* ego than he does."

Senku rolled his eyes, but Ukyo simply shook his head, smiling slightly. "You really are something else, Ryusui."

Ryusui smirked. "Hah! And *don't you forget it!*"

Snap.

Punch.

The head *rolled* to a stop at Senku's feet. For a second, all he could do was *stare*. Tsukasa stood above the remains of the statue—no hesitation, no regret, just *purpose*. And in *his* mind, Senku realized, he had just *killed* a man. Tsukasa didn't know. He didn't know that with careful hands, steady work, and the right materials, that shattered person could still be put back together. That they could still *be saved*. But in *his* mind, this was an execution. Senku exhaled softly through his nose, gaze flicking down to the severed head on the ground. *Tch. Idiot.*

He let a dark grin creep onto his face, gaze sliding up to meet Tsukasa's.

"You *do* know what you just did, don't you?" His voice was light, almost amused, but sharp enough to *cut*.

Tsukasa didn't react—at least, not *visibly*.

Senku tilted his head, red eyes gleaming. "*That* might have *looked* like a statue," he said, voice smooth, "but we *both* know you just *killed a man.*"

The words hung between them, swallowed by the ocean wind.

Senku's grin widened, but there was no humor in it.

So.

This was how it was going to be.

Ryusui let out a low whistle, shaking his head. "Hah. Well, *that* escalated quickly."

Chrome looked pale. "*Holy shit.*"

Kohaku crossed her arms, eyes sharp. "Yeah. There was no coming back from that."

Gen's usual smirk was absent. He tapped a finger to his lips, eyes flicking toward Senku. "*Tsk, tsk, tsk~*, Senku-chan," he murmured, "You handled that *far* too well."

Senku huffed. "What was I supposed to do? *Panic?*"

"Ohhh, no, no, no." Gen's gaze twinkled with something sharp. "*That's not what I meant.*" He tilted his head, studying him. "You were *calm*. *Too* calm. No real shock, no hesitation—actually, now that I think about it, you're *always* like that when things get dangerous. Especially when it comes to Tsukasa."

Senku gave him a flat look. "I was *assessing the threat*."

"And *enjoying every second of it*," Gen countered smoothly. "Come on, Senku-chan. Be honest with yourself a little."

Ryusui grinned. "Hah! Now *that* makes sense! If you like this kind of high-stakes game, why didn't you join the army or something? You could've been their strategist."

Senku clicked his tongue. "*Tch.* That sounds *inefficient*. And it wouldn't involve nearly enough **science**."

"You never got to *test* yourself back then, did you?" Ukyo said quietly. His gaze stayed steady on Senku, unblinking. "*Not like this.* Not in *real* stakes. You were always thinking ten steps ahead, but in the modern world, there were *rules*. Here?" He gestured slightly. "*There were none.*"

Senku didn't respond, but the silence was answer enough. They were *pulling* so many things out of him right now, and it was getting *tiring*. First, all those comments about Tsukasa. Then Gen—who had *no business* being that perceptive—digging into his psyche. Senku really didn't know how to deal with it. It felt *personal*. And frankly? He was starting to get **very, very excited** for the part of the story where they *finally* stopped talking about *him*.

Chrome frowned. "Wait. Hold on. Are you saying that Senku—*what*, likes being in life-or-death situations?!"

Kohaku scoffed. "*He thrives in them.*"

Gen grinned. "Ohhh, *absolutely*~."

"*That's insane,*" Chrome muttered.

"No, it's *greed*," Ryusui said, smirking. "The *best* kind of greed—the kind that makes a person want to push their limits. Senku *wants* to prove he's the smartest man in the room. And what better way than pitting his brain against someone who *should* be unstoppable?"

Taiju shifted uncomfortably. "I don’t know… I mean, *danger* isn’t exactly a *good* thing."

"Maybe not for *you*," Gen said lightly. "But for Senku? *It’s the ultimate test.* And he *loves* a challenge."

Ukyo tilted his head slightly. *But the real question is… how far does that go?*

Senku exhaled, rubbing the back of his head. "You guys are overthinking it."

Gen *beamed*. "Ohhh, *Senku-chan*, you say that, but we all just watched you grin like a maniac the moment things got *really* interesting."

Kohaku shook her head, smirking. "Honestly? I’m *not* surprised."

Chrome still looked vaguely horrified. "*I am.*"

Ukyo just watched Senku, gaze thoughtful.

Because Gen was *right*.

Senku hadn’t just *handled* the situation. He had *enjoyed* it. And Ukyo had a feeling that, deep down, Senku missed it. Which meant… at some point, *something* was going to push him to chase that thrill again. Because that was the life of a *true* thrill-seeker.

"Of *course* I know," Tsukasa said smoothly.

He turned toward Senku, his figure silhouetted against the harsh sunlight. The glare burned against Senku’s vision, but he refused to blink, refused to *look away*.

Not from *him*.

"Tell me, Senku," Tsukasa continued, voice calm—too calm. "Are you really planning to bring back *all* the greedy, blackhearted adults that ruined the world we came from?"

Senku didn't answer. He just *watched*.

"Oh, sure, at first, they'll be *grateful*—falling at your feet, singing your praises. But the moment civilization reestablishes itself? The *rich and powerful* will start saying things like, *'This used to be my property. Start paying me rent.'*" His expression remained even, but his voice hardened, "And then? They'll demand *taxes*. They'll rebuild *hierarchies*. They'll *hoard* power for themselves and seize control *again*, declaring that the world they lost was *rightfully theirs*—as if we owe them anything."

Senku exhaled slowly through his nose.

"We *can't* bring that world back," Tsukasa continued, voice unwavering. "This is the Stone World now. A world untouched by corruption, by greed, by the *ownership of others*."

His gaze locked onto Senku's, sharp, unwavering. "*A paradise.*"

Senku clenched his jaw.

Tsukasa took another step forward, lowering his voice. "I believe we should only revive the *young*, the *pure-hearted*—those who haven't been poisoned by the past. If we do that, we can keep this world as it was meant to be. *Untamed. Natural. Free.*"

The wind carried the scent of salt and something *colder* between them.

"This is our chance to *purify* humanity," Tsukasa finished, his tone carrying the weight of conviction. "Don't you *agree* with me, Senku?"

Taiju frowned. He wasn't the smartest guy in the room—heck, he was *never* the smartest guy in the room—but *even he* knew how ridiculous that question was.

Agree with Tsukasa? Senku? The same Senku who spent his *entire life* dreaming about space? Who built a generator *out of nothing*? Who counted *for over three thousand years* just to make sure he didn't lose track of time? Senku would rather chew glass than give up on science. The idea of Senku abandoning civilization—actual, real civilization—was so ridiculous that for a moment, Taiju genuinely thought Tsukasa was joking.

But he wasn't.

Tsukasa meant every word.

Taiju's fists clenched. Senku didn't need Taiju to explain why this was ridiculous—he already knew—but still. He couldn't stop himself from running through the sheer *insanity* of what Tsukasa was asking. Senku wasn't the type to accept things as they were. He wasn't the type to say, *This world is fine as it is, let's keep it this way.* Senku was the kind of person who looked at fire, at the stars, at the very laws of the universe itself, and thought, *I bet I can figure that out.*

And then?

He did.

Tsukasa thought he was offering a better future—some kind of ideal paradise. But Taiju knew Senku would never see it that way.

Because to Senku, a world *without science* wasn't a paradise.

It was a prison.

And if Tsukasa really thought he could convince Senku to *agree* with him?

Then he didn't understand Senku at all.

"He's stupid," was all Taiju said, and no one else said anything. Honestly, in this they couldn't agree more. The idea of Senku leaving science? It was laughable to all of them.

It probably wasn't the best time to bring up the science of economics, Senku thought ruefully. Didn't make it any less relevant. Still, even knowing this was coming—even

knowing that Tsukasa had *always* been a ticking time bomb—it was still a damn shame to see it unfold like this.

Tsukasa raised his fist again, ready to strike down another adult.

Senku moved.

His body was still recovering, but the protein had helped. He made it in time. His hand clamped down on Tsukasa's shoulder, stopping him mid-swing.

"No, I don't agree with you. That speech? Didn't move me one millimeter." His lips curled into a grin—sharp, unwavering, "Not a single atom of my brain agrees with that nonsense."

Tsukasa finally turned to face him, his expression unreadable.

Senku lifted his chin, gaze steady. "I'm the kind of guy who absolutely loves technology. I get *excited* by space, by mechs, by Doraemon and all that cool sci-fi stuff." His hand dropped from Tsukasa's shoulder, but he didn't step back, "I'm going to use the awesome power of science to rescue every last person."

The words weren't just a declaration.

They were a challenge.

Kohaku's voice was sharp, incredulous. "Senku, are you *insane*?"

Senku clicked his tongue, rubbing the back of his neck. "*Tch.* It wasn't like that."

"You reached out to *stop* a guy who literally just *punched a lion unconscious*," Chrome blurted. "That's *exactly* like that!"

"You didn't just stop him," Ukyo murmured, watching Senku carefully. "You *challenged* him."

Senku exhaled sharply. He could *feel* everyone's eyes on him—like they were waiting for an explanation he wasn't sure how to give. And that was the *frustrating* part. Because the longer he thought about it—watching himself on the screen, seeing his own actions unfold—the more he realized that *Gen, Ryusui, and Ukyo had been right all along*. Why the hell had he

done that? He *knew* what Tsukasa was capable of. He'd *seen* his strength. He'd *calculated the risk*.

And still, he had reached for him.

Still, he had stepped forward without hesitation.

Senku's fingers twitched, restless against his knee.

Was it instinct? A miscalculation? No—he didn't make mistakes like that.

Which meant…

He'd *wanted* to do it.

His stomach twisted, irritation curling in his chest.

They were right.

Ryusui's sharp grin. Gen's amused, knowing gaze. Ukyo's quiet, unwavering analysis. They had all seen something in him that he hadn't fully acknowledged in himself—and now he was *forced* to look at it, undeniable and clear as day.

Senku wasn't just willing to face danger.

He sought it out.

And worse? He *enjoyed it*.

His jaw tightened. *Damn it.*

Kohaku, meanwhile, had folded her arms, her expression dark. "I didn't know this happened." Her voice was quieter now, but no less serious. "You were *that* close to him? That close to being killed?"

Senku shrugged. "Well, I didn't die, so it worked out."

"That's *not* the point," she snapped. "Even *I* wouldn't challenge Tsukasa like that. And you —" She gestured at him. "—you have *zero* combat ability. You were in danger, Senku."

Senku didn't answer that, she was right, so he stayed silent.

Ryusui let out a short laugh, breaking the tension. "*Hah!* And you *still* think we were overanalyzing, Senku?" He gestured at the frozen screen. "That right there? That's the *look* of a man who *wanted* to test himself against an impossible force."

Senku exhaled through his nose, looking vaguely annoyed. "*I was handling the situation.*"

Gen chuckled, resting his chin in his hand. "Ohhh, but Senku-chan, you *could* have handled the situation in so many ways. Instead, you *physically* stepped in front of a man who could have reduced you to a smear on the beach with *one* hit." He tilted his head, watching him. "Now, *why* do you think you did that~?"

Senku rolled his eyes.

Ukyo studied Senku for a moment before speaking. "So. Now that you've seen it for yourself, what do you think?"

Senku glanced at the screen. At himself, standing in front of Tsukasa, picking a fight with an apex predator. At the way his body had *moved before his brain could catch up*.

He sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. "I think you guys should shut up."

Gen *beamed*. "Aha~! That's an admission of guilt if I've ever heard one."

Chrome shook his head, still looking baffled. "So you *really do* like this kind of thing, huh?"

Damn it.

He *hated* when they were right.

> Senku had thoughts. *Cutting* thoughts.
>
> So what happens when the young and pure-hearted grow up? Who decides which hearts are still *pure*? Who enforces it? Are *you* going to lead them, Tsukasa? And if so—does that not make the land your land? Does that not make *you* the greedy landowner? Do you not realize why taxes existed? Do you really think humanity can function without *governance, structure, leadership*?
>
> It *doesn't* work like that.
>
> Senku exhaled sharply through his nose, watching Tsukasa with calculated irritation.
>
> Tsukasa was an idealist of the highest order—so completely convinced that his vision was *right* that he couldn't see its inevitable flaws.
>
> It was *almost* funny.
>
> If not for the fact that this man—this walking paradox—posed the single greatest threat to their already delicate future.

1 hour until playback starts.

"Hah," Ryusui scoffed, shaking his head. "*Now that's* the Senku I know."

Chrome blinked. "Uh—what part?"

Ryusui smirked, gesturing at the screen. "The part where he immediately dissects Tsukasa's entire worldview and shreds it down to its *most* inconvenient truths."

Ukyo exhaled, arms crossed. "He wasn't wrong."

"Of course he wasn't," Kohaku muttered, still watching the screen, her expression dark. "Tsukasa's ideas *sound* nice, but they fall apart the second you look at them with any real scrutiny."

Senku huffed, rolling his eyes. "*Tch.* That wasn't even all the possible counterpoints. I've got plenty more."

He lifted a finger. "*First off*, who decides what qualifies as 'pure-hearted'? You? Some moral council? What happens when they start disagreeing? Do we hold purity trials? *Second*, do you actually think young people are magically free from greed and corruption? Give them power and resources, and watch them do exactly what their predecessors did. The cycle repeats. *Third*, if you refuse leadership, then civilization crumbles into anarchy. If you do take control, you've created a monarchy. Either way, you end up with a ruler class—congrats, you just reinvented the thing you claim to hate. *Fourth*, land, food, shelter—all limited resources. Are you going to distribute them? Then you're an authority. Are you going to let people fight for them? Then you're endorsing lawless chaos. Either way, there's ownership, no matter how much you pretend there isn't."

He exhaled sharply, crossing his arms. "Want me to keep going?"

"But you weren't just *debunking* him," Ukyo pointed out. "You were frustrated. You weren't just thinking about the flaws in his logic—you were *annoyed* by how ridiculous it was."

Senku clicked his tongue, gaze shifting. He wasn't annoyed—not really. Not in the way they meant. But the flaws were so *blatant*, so *obvious*, that the fact that Tsukasa truly believed in his own ideals *was* frustrating. Because idealists were dangerous. Because conviction without logic made people reckless. Because *this* was the kind of person who would break the world again if given the chance.

Taiju, who had been silent, suddenly exhaled a long, slow breath. "...I *really* don't get why he would think Senku would ever *agree* with him."

"Right?" Chrome nodded. "Senku, what would you *even* do if you were thrown into a world without science? Just… farm? Fish?" He snorted. "You'd go insane in, like, a week."

"Two days," Gen corrected.

"One," Ryusui said confidently.

"Half a day," Ukyo added dryly.

Senku rolled his eyes. "You guys are so dramatic."

Gen grinned, resting his chin in his hands. "*Ohhh~, but Senku-chan, we're just thinking logically. And we know you—so unless you suddenly feel like giving up space travel to run barefoot through the woods in a handwoven toga—"

"Not happening."

"Exactly!" Gen clapped his hands together. "So! We can *all* agree that Tsukasa's entire premise was doomed from the start, right?"

Senku exhaled. "*Obviously.*"

Kohaku sighed, still not willing to let it go, "And yet… you still stepped toward him."

The conversation stalled.

The moment stretched.

And for once, Senku didn’t have a quick comeback.

Because, yeah. He *had*.

Ukyo tilted his head slightly, already knowing the answer, "Why?"

Senku’s fingers tapped against his knee.

The answer was simple.

Because he needed to stop Tsukasa.

Because he needed to keep Taiju safe.

Because there was no other option.

But also—

Because it was interesting.

Because something about facing off against someone that strong, that certain, that dangerous —

Had been thrilling.

…Damn it.

Ryusui smirked, catching his expression. "Out of denial yet?"

Senku clicked his tongue. "Shut up."

Gen *beamed*. "Aha~! A scientific breakthrough in real-time!"

Chrome sighed, shaking his head. "Man. You really are something else."

Chapter End Notes

It's been awhile! Just finished up the newest episodes and that of course means I had the urge to write a bit here. I also edited some of the earlier chapters. I think they really did well in this section of the story, without giving too much away, I think they made our antagonists much more IDK, intimidating, than they were in the manga. At least for me.

For those who aren't in the know, this fic was based off another and I had permission to take their episodes transcript but now we are all caught up in that other story so I had to do the transcript by hand - And will have to do that from now on - So I'm sorry if the vibe of the story changed a lot now that we don't have source material.

Bless ChatGPT, the better version of Grammarly.

I added some relationships I wanna play into. After this chapter, I didn't know what to do with Ryusui but now I KINDA wanna put him with Tsukasa for SOME sort of

relationship. Haven't really made up my mind on that one.

Chapter 10: Episode 3 Part 1

Chapter Notes

> It has been so long in the story that people might not remember that Senku had stated he was going to talk to Gen about his experience trying to stay awake during the petrification. If you are interested in rereading that before reading this chapter you can click here: Chapter 5: Interlude One - Gen's Petrification Chapter 5: Interlude One - Gen's Petrification

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Senku wasn't the type to forget about promises he had made to himself. Gen had thrown him off by pulling him aside and talking to Senku about his own issues. That wouldn't stop Senku from his earlier plan of confronting the Mentalist about his Petrification experiences. The break was going to last about an hour—*plenty of time* to follow through on one of his earlier thoughts. Addressing it was better than letting it sit.

If it was bothering the Mentalist, then addressing it could help his productivity.

It wasn't *just* a flimsy excuse—there was science behind it. Stress responses—especially unresolved psychological burdens—could disrupt focus, impair dopamine regulation, and even mess with working memory retrieval. If Gen's brain was caught up in a feedback loop of unprocessed trauma, then his usual mental flexibility would be stifled. Less adaptability, more cognitive rigidity. In short? He wouldn't be thinking as *fast* as usual.

And Senku needed Gen thinking fast.

That was an easy conclusion to make.

With that in mind, Senku turned toward Gen.

"Alright, Mentalist. Come with me."

Gen blinked, but with the smoothness of a *practiced performer*, he immediately smiled and stood up. He made a show of dusting off his clothing, even though there wasn't a *speck* of dust on him. *Illogical.* But Senku expected such dramatics from him at this point. Sure enough, Gen smoothed over the callout effortlessly, "I should've known Senku-chan wouldn't let us rest. You want me making more film for the cameras again, don't you? I can't believe this."

Senku shrugged but didn't answer. He also didn't *correct the lie.* He just let it sit, nodding toward the door.

Gen took the hint, and the two walked out side by side.

They left the boat entirely.

Senku didn't *want* to have this conversation near the others—not after Ukyou had *definitely* overheard their last private discussion. He wasn't going to risk that happening again.

They reached one of the *mini-labs* Senku had scattered throughout their territory. *Conveniently*, it was one of the locations where they developed camera film—which meant Gen's lie would hold up effortlessly if anyone asked. Not because Senku had specifically chosen a place that aligned with the excuse. Not because he had *already considered* how best to ensure they wouldn't be interrupted. Not because he wanted to control every variable in the conversation—including the external perception of why they were even here.

No, of course not.

Just a *happy accident.*

Senku closed the door behind them.

"Alright. Spill."

Gen blinked, glancing up from where he had been absentmindedly flipping a small stone between his fingers—*dexterity training*, no doubt. Keeping his hands steady for all those *sleight-of-hand tricks* he pulled so well.

"Hmmm~? Spill what, exactly?"

Senku didn't play along. *Everyone else had offered Gen comfort. That wasn't what he needed.* Senku wasn't the comforting type anyway, but *he could offer understanding—and that* was the logical choice. A hug from Kohaku wasn't going to fix this. *But knowing he wasn't alone in something tragic?* That, unfortunately, was a *very human need.* And one that only Senku could provide.

"Seventy years, Gen." His voice wasn't teasing. Wasn't light. It was flat. Measured. "You were awake for seventy years."

The stone slipped from Gen's fingers, landing in the dirt with a muted *thunk.*

"...Oh," Gen murmured, playing at innocence—*like he hadn't already known this was coming the second they left the ship.*

"That."

Senku didn't let him deflect.

"You should've told me earlier." *I could have offered insight. What happened to sharing the mental burden, Gen?*

Gen let out a slow breath, stretching his arms behind his head in an exaggerated motion, "Ohhh, Senku-chan, it's ancient history! Literally! Petrified history, even! No use dwelling on

—"

"Cut the act."

Senku wasn't *dismissing it*—he was stating *a fact*. *He boxed things away when necessary.* But *Gen wasn't built like that, "*"I know what it means to force yourself to stay awake for too long." Senku's eyes narrowed slightly, calculating. "I know what it does to your brain. And I know that when you stopped—when you finally let yourself go—you thought it meant you were dying."

Senku exhaled, then added, quieter—*but no less sharp:*

"I know because I considered it. Several times."

Gen *froze.*

It was brief—*a fraction of a second.*

But it was there.

Senku saw it.

Gen exhaled through his nose, tilting his head, an easy—*too easy*—smile stretching across his face.

"Oh, you're a cruel one, Senku-chan. Dragging a poor mentalist's subconscious baggage into the open like this." His voice was *light.* His tone was *wrong,* "With an attempt to relate, no less? My, my—perhaps you should've been the psychologist between us."

Senku just *stared.*

Gen’s smile *twitched* at the edges.

"Well," he continued, spreading his hands. "What do you want me to say? That I panicked? That I lasted as long as I could until it felt like—" He stopped. Clicked his tongue. Reworded. "—until I decided it was better to just let go? That I genuinely believed I was making the choice to stop existing?"

Senku leaned forward slightly. "Yeah."

Gen blinked. "Huh?"

"I want you to say it," Senku repeated, voice still level. "Because I know you don't deal with things the same way I do. I know that for you, it's better if you can see that someone else went through the same thing—you can see that you weren't alone. You can see it reflected in another person, see how it might have affected them, study it like the psychologist you are. *It will make you feel better...* Like I said, I thought the same while I was staying awake. Several times. Every couple hundred years, I'd start questioning the point of it all. The chance of revival was already microscopic, and it dropped with every second. Once the probability hit less than one percent—" Senku exhaled sharply. "Why bother?"

His tone remained casual, but Gen wasn’t fooled.

"I came close a few times."

Gen’s fingers twitched in his lap.

Senku’s eyes flicked to them, then back to Gen’s face. "You can ask me anything you want."

For once, Gen had nothing witty to say.

The silence stretched between them.

"...Well, damn," Gen muttered, shaking his head. "Here I thought I was the mentalist."

Senku snorted. "Yeah, well. I know a thing or two about compartmentalizing, too."

Senku's eyes glinted. "I don't see why not. *I'll be your first case study in this Stone World.*" His grin widened as he leaned back on his hands. "Think about it—*the first psychological analysis in over 3,700 years.* A completely unprecedented opportunity. No historical data, no external biases. *Pure, undisturbed human cognition after millennia in petrification.* You get to break new ground in your field, and I get to watch it happen. Ten billion percent a win-win."

Gen huffed a laugh, tilting his head as he studied him. "First case study, huh? You already have any conclusions?"

Senku tapped a finger against his temple, eyes narrowing in thought. "Oh, I've got plenty. Though, I will leave the conclusions to the professional. Cognitive adaptability under extreme isolation, neural plasticity in an extended stasis state, the limits of sensory deprivation—*and* the absurd mental gymnastics required to convince yourself that letting go of consciousness is the same as dying."

Gen blinked. "Okay, ouch. That last one felt *pointed.*"

Senku smirked. "Observation, Mentalist. *Not judgment.*"

Gen chuckled, shaking his head. "When did you get so good at psychology, Senku-chan? It was reading my book, wasn't it? It's okay, you can admit it."

"I have perfect recall, Mentalist," Senku grumbled, though he didn’t seem particularly annoyed.

"Uh-huh."

Gen picked up the stone he had dropped earlier, rolling it between his fingers. His tone was lighter now, but something in his expression had shifted.

"You know," he mused, "we made a deal back on the ship, didn’t we? To share the mental burden. To take on all these lovely little moral catastrophes together. *To carve out our little place in Hell.*"

Senku hummed, leaning back on his hands. "Yeah. We did."

Gen’s fingers curled loosely around the stone. "That still stand?"

Senku scoffed. "Of course it does, don't be a moron."

A beat.

Then Senku added, voice quieter but firm, "But if you're going to take on some of my weight —then I’m taking on some of yours, too. *Don't go thinking some illogical nonsense, Gen.* It only makes sense that we actually share the burden."

Gen stilled. Then exhaled slowly, a lopsided smile creeping onto his face. "...Fair’s fair, huh?"

"Exactly." Senku immediately agreed.

He realized, distantly, that these conversations with Gen didn't make his skin crawl the way they would if he were talking to Taiju or Yuzuriha. He didn't know why, and he didn't particularly care to analyze it right now. What he *did* know was that Gen would *absolutely* take him up on that first case study offer. And that meant *a lot* of emotional discussions in his future. Senku wasn't sure how he felt about that. Provided it was *anyone other than Gen* conducting it, it would probably be unbearable. But *so far*...

He shook off the thought, shooting his friend a grin. "We better get back to the ship."

They walked back, far more relaxed than before.

Gen had to admit—Senku might have been right about the whole *needing to take the situation apart to feel better* thing. Because now that he *knew* talking to Senku about his experiences wasn't off-limits, now that he had the option, questions were already circling his mind. The need to *understand* how the brain worked under petrification. Their shared and differing experiences. The way it felt, how it changed perception.

It was calming. *Oddly* calming.

Like putting puzzle pieces into place, like settling into a rhythm he hadn't realized he'd been missing.

Gen glanced over at Senku as they walked back. A comfortable silence had fallen between them.

"How much longer do we have before the replay starts?" Gen asked, but it was more of a test than anything. Because now that he was *looking for it*, he was curious—Was Senku still *counting*? Even now? *Trauma? Habit?*

Senku snorted. *"You truly waste no time, Mentalist. We have exactly 32 minutes and 14, 13, 12 seconds."*

He counted down, deliberately, like a demonstration. Like proof.

Gen couldn’t help the small grin that tugged at his lips. Senku *had* promised to be open about things, after all.

"Do we have any plan so far?"

Senku grinned as they reached the door. "I'm thinking we should bring in a few other perspectives. It's about that time, after all."

With that, he pulled the door open, not wasting a second—maybe to stop anyone from asking about what *he and Gen* had been talking about. Ukyou still gave them a sharp look.

"I think we should have Yuzuriha and François join us for this little watch party," Senku announced casually, dropping the statement like he *hadn't* already calculated this. "I thought about it a little bit, and I think they'd be a good fit. Do you agree, Mentalist?"

Those two, huh?

Gen hummed to himself, amused, but as he considered it, he realized it was actually a smart choice. Yuzuriha was grounded, offering something to the Taiju-Senku dynamic that *balanced* things. Her emotional depth and intelligence were probably among the highest in the Kingdom of Science. François, on the other hand, would bring a calm, dryly analytical perspective—exactly the kind of thing that could offer levity in the heavier moments. Much like Ryusui, they had a keen sense of when to interject and when to let a conversation play out. Additionally, François was the newest member of their core group. They would soon be sailing for extended periods of time, and getting them integrated now would strengthen the long-term group dynamics.

Instead of saying *all* that, Gen just chuckled, "It would be fun to see her reaction to the things Taiju is thinking."

Rather than his usual unabashed self, Taiju actually flushed. Then, after a beat, he perked up with renewed enthusiasm and nodded. *"I'll run and get them then! Great idea, Senku!"*

Senku rolled his eyes but settled back into his seat.

Gen followed, slipping into place beside him once more, waiting.

The sound of footsteps on the deck signaled their arrival before the door swung open.

Taiju led the way—predictable, energetic, practically radiating excitement as he stepped inside.

"Alright! We're back!" he announced, far louder than necessary.

Yuzuriha followed at a quieter, more measured pace, eyes flicking curiously across the setup—the chairs arranged around the screen, the projector humming faintly, and the expressions of the people who had already been watching. François, as composed as ever, entered last. Their gaze swept across the makeshift theater, taking in the unusual intensity in the air, the way even Gen—normally so flippant—seemed to be lingering on some deep thought.

A quiet beat.

Then François clasped their hands behind their back and finally spoke.

"I take it we have not simply gathered for a casual film viewing, then."

Gen, grinning like a cat who had been handed fresh mischief, leaned forward. "Ohhh, François, my dear, this is so much more than that~."

Yuzuriha tilted her head. "What exactly are we watching?"

Chrome, who had been fidgeting in his seat, immediately perked up. "Oh! Right! We should probably explain. Basically—before we set sail, Senku of the future sent recordings back in time. It's not just the past—we're seeing everything. The thoughts people had at the time, perspectives we didn't get to see firsthand. We're literally watching history unfold. Senku's note from the future said to, 'think of it as Kingdom of Science bonding.' It's been interesting so far."

A beat of silence.

Then—

"Wait, *what?*" Yuzuriha's eyes widened.

François raised an eyebrow, though their expression remained even. "Intriguing."

"You mean like… an actual replay of what happened?" Yuzuriha glanced toward Senku. "You can just *see* everything unfold?"

"Yep," Senku confirmed.

"That's amazing," Yuzuriha murmured, eyes flicking toward the screen. "It's like being able to look directly into history. We can actually see what you went through."

"And *hear thoughts,*" Kohaku added dryly. "Which is how we learned that Senku is a reckless lunatic who keeps throwing himself into danger for fun."

Senku rolled his eyes. "That's called *problem-solving,* thanks."

Gen, clearly enjoying himself, let out a laugh. "You'll have to forgive him, Yuzuriha—Senku-chan is, shall we say, *very* proactive when it comes to high-risk engagement. He has come to some recent revelations about his own risk taking behavior."

François considered this with a thoughtful nod. "A fascinating opportunity. Reviewing past events with the knowledge of the present could provide valuable insight—if utilized correctly."

"Exactly!" Chrome nodded. "We've already figured out a ton just from watching! Plus, we get to see all the ridiculous things Taiju said back then."

Taiju blinked, alarmed. "Huh? What do you mean? What did I say?"

Gen's grin turned wicked, finding it a little too cruel for even him to go into the constant thoughts of confession he had for Yuzuriha, "Ohhh, nothing too bad, dear Taiju~. Just things like 'the most important part of civilization is *smartphones*' and other such gems."

Taiju turned bright red. "Wait—no way, I said that?! That doesn't even—!"

"You did," Kohaku confirmed, smirking.

Yuzuriha giggled into her hand. "That does sound like you."

François merely gave a small, considering nod. "I can only imagine what other thought-provoking insights have been immortalized."

Taiju groaned. "Oh man…"

Yuzuriha glanced around the room. "So, is it just us watching, or are you planning to bring in more people?"

At that, Senku immediately shook his head. "We don’t want too many people."

Gen, ever the opportunist, leaned forward with a knowing glint in his eye. "Ahhh, and there’s a *very* good reason for that!"

He gestured animatedly, as if unveiling some grand psychological truth.

"See, when a group gets too big, the ability to focus on details starts to drop significantly. Too many voices, too much distraction—it’s human nature! The more people you have analyzing something, the more likely the discussion will get diluted with side conversations, personal biases, or just plain chaos, "He tapped his temple, his grin widening. "So, for maximum effectiveness, it’s best to keep a core group that balances sharp analysis, varied perspectives, and just the right amount of emotional engagement."

Senku huffed. "Or in simpler terms—What I said. Mentalist, you didn't need to make it so complicated."

But even as he dismissed it, his fingers twitched slightly against the table. That damned Mentalist, when he explained his thought process... *Damn it,* he actually liked when Gen broke things down like this. Not the theatrics, not the playful exaggeration, but the logic underneath it—the way Gen’s mind worked, the way he could analyze human behavior so efficiently. It was *effective.* It was *smart.* It pissed Senku off, because there wasn't a chance in their cold little corner of scientific Hell that Senku was actually going to act on these feelings...

Didn't change the way a shiver was sent down his spine.

François gave a small, approving nod. "An entirely reasonable assessment. In fields requiring precision, an overabundance of opinions can be more of a hindrance than a help."

"Exactly!" Gen beamed.

Yuzuriha nodded, seemingly satisfied with the explanation. "That makes sense."

Taiju, still recovering from embarrassment, just rubbed the back of his head. "Alright, alright, I get it. So… What part are we at now?"

Senku leaned back, grinning. "Let's find out."

... He doubted Tsukasa would do anything rash—at least until he learned how to make revival fluid. So long as I keep my mouth shut about that, he can't do a damn thing. No revival fluid means no bringing anyone back, young or old. Senku kept his expression neutral, but the weight of Tsukasa's stare pressed against him—calculating, assessing. Those brown eyes felt heavier than they should have.

Then—

"Heeeeey!! Awesome news, you guys! Check this out!"

Before the oaf even opened his mouth, Senku had a bad feeling. Taiju came barreling over, grinning from ear to ear, and lifted a pot high above his head like some kind of victory trophy.

"I got a whole pot full of miracle fluid from the cave! That means we can finally use this stuff to bring back Yuzuriha!"

Senku's stomach dropped.

Damn it.

The screen flickered, and for a moment, nobody spoke.

Ukyo had to admit, it was interesting watching their new companions watch a screen for the first time in years. He wondered if they had looked at it with the same amazement, Senku hadn't, but that was Senku and different. François' gaze remained steady, but their fingers twitched slightly against their sleeves. Yuzuriha's hands curled together in her lap, her eyes wide as they flicked between the image on the screen and the others around her.

"It's…" Yuzuriha started, voice quiet, almost reverent.

"Astounding," François finished, their usual measured tone carrying just a trace of something deeper.

Ryusui, always quick to adapt, grinned. "Impressive, isn't it? The sheer decadence of being able to relive history itself? No mere retelling, no distorted word-of-mouth—just the raw truth, captured forever. Our very own hyper realistic documentary, why, I think once we have revived everyone this will be worth quite a bit. The story of how we brought back humanity from the brick of extinction."

Greedy bastard, Senku thought to himself, more fond than not. He and Gen shared an amused look.

François nodded slightly. "A luxury we once took for granted, now restored by science, seeing things such as this in detail."

Yuzuriha let out a small laugh, shaking her head. "It almost feels like a dream. Like watching a memory come to life."

Taiju, beaming at their reactions, clapped a hand to his chest. "Right?! It's amazing! We're actually seeing everything exactly as it happened!"

Which was *exactly* when the realization finally caught up to him. Because on screen—Taiju had just proudly declared to Tsukasa that he had an entire pot of revival fluid.

A heavy silence settled over the group.

Then—

"TAIJU!"

The chorus of voices practically rattled the ship.

Taiju flinched, staggering back. "W-Whoa! What?! What'd I do?!"

"Ohhhh, dear," Gen giggled behind his fingers, but his eyes glinted with something sharper. He was glad that Taiju was no longer involved in any sort of negotiations, he would get them killed, "I *was* wondering how Tsukasa found out about the miracle fluid so quickly. And now we know."

Chrome, halfway through dragging his hands down his face, groaned. "You didn't even hesitate! You just *told him*!"

Ukyo, always one of the most composed, pinched the bridge of his nose. "You *do* understand that this is a problem, right, Taiju?"

"B-But… it was great news! We were gonna revive Yuzuriha! That *was* the plan, right?"

"Oh yeah, great news," He deadpanned. Senku, leaning back with his arms crossed, exhaled sharply through his nose. "Nothing says 'good strategy' like announcing classified information to someone we just met—who, by the way, *just* killed a lion with his bare hands. Which you seem to keep forgetting, you oaf."

Taiju winced, almost pouting. Yuzuriha moved to fit next to him, giving him a small pat on the head. Taiju shot her a beaming smile.

"Ohhh, Taiju," Gen sighed dramatically, pressing a hand to his chest. "You are a man of many strengths. But discretion? Not one of them."

"Understatement of the century," Kohaku muttered, which was saying something, because she also wasn't exactly the most discrete on their little team.

François, who had been quietly observing all of this, finally spoke, "To summarize, you are telling me that, despite holding what was effectively the *single most valuable resource in existence*, your first course of action was to *broadcast its existence* to the first person you encountered?"

Visibly sweating now, Taiju let out a nervous chuckle. "Uh… yeah?"

François blinked once. "How fascinating."

Senku, watching François closely, smirked. "You're trying very hard not to say *'idiotic,'* aren't you?"

François gave a small, polite nod. "I was raised to be tactful."

Chrome burst out laughing, Gen didn't look too far behind for the amusement sparking in his eyes.

Yuzuriha, still absorbing everything, pressed a hand to her mouth, stifling a giggle. "It… does sound like something Taiju would do."

"HEY!"

"But," she continued, smiling kindly, "He did it because he trusted Tsukasa completely. That's just the type of person that Taiju is."

That quieted the group. Senku couldn't help the chuckle that escaped. Yuzuriha always looked at the bright side of Taiju's actions, and was never wrong. She had a way of looking straight through it all, which made sense, because honestly? She and that big oaf? They were the same in most things that really mattered.

Taiju, shoulders still tense, finally exhaled, rubbing the back of his head. "I mean… yeah. That was it. Back then, I thought Tsukasa was just trying to help. I *believed* in him. So of course I thought he'd be happy about it."

Senku couldn't believe his eyes. His ears. His own *fucking thoughts.*

There was no way this oaf had actually blown the whole thing before it even *began.* His mind kicked into overdrive, strategies shifting, reorganizing, rerouting. The best option —well, looked like they were going to have to make a run for it. Senku exhaled sharply, forcing his expression into something neutral as Tsukasa asked about the fluid. His body wanted to tense, every survival instinct screaming at him to be *ready*, but he forced himself to stay loose. Controlled. Calm.

He let out a small sigh, falling into a chuckle as he cracked his neck. Uncomfortable, but necessary. Backup plan.

I hope it doesn't come down to that.

But realistically…

It was always better to plan for *every* eventuality.

If he started laying the groundwork *now*—seeding the right subliminals in Tsukasa's mind—the last-resort plan would be *safer.*

(*But not safe enough.* The theory wasn't proven—it was a hypothesis at best. And the null hypothesis for this one? Death.)

I still have too much to do. Too much science to learn.

Time to start.

"I won't waste my breath trying to explain the science behind it," Senku stated, turning away without hesitation, keeping his muscles deliberately relaxed as he showed this predator his back. "Showing you will be ten billion times faster."

He strode forward, every step measured, every move calculated.

"I hope you realize what an honor this is," he continued smoothly. "You're about to witness humanity's revival firsthand."

"Did you already build something?" Ryusui leaned forward, eyes sharp with curiosity. "Some kind of trap or a bluff? What was your angle?"

Even François looked intrigued. "A contingency, I assume. I would be quite interested in your reasoning for attempting such a maneuver under those conditions."

All eyes turned to Senku. Except for the ones who were already in the know, the shady looking Taiju and Yuzuriha.

Senku, arms crossed, barely glanced up from where he was adjusting the remote settings. "You'll see."

Chrome blinked. "Wait—that's it? That's your answer?"

Gen, from the side, tilted his head. "Ohhh~? Senku-chan, are you *dodging* the question?"

Senku didn't flinch. "The plan plays out on the screen anyway. Why waste time explaining it now?"

Kohaku narrowed her eyes. "You're being evasive."

"I'm being efficient," Senku replied flatly.

Gen studied him a little more closely than the others. That kind of dismissiveness wasn't just deflection—it was *avoidance*. Senku was fine with risk. Thrived in it, even. But this wasn't about risk. It was about the cost. Because Gen knew that look on the screen version of their

leader—Senku had already calculated the odds and accepted them. And judging by the subtle shift in his jaw, the tap of his thumb against his elbow… He hadn't told them because he didn't want to deal with the *reaction.*

Senku didn't want to talk about what it meant that *he* had almost died. To the point that Tsukasa had actually suspected him to be dead, Senku had never said any details, but some things just kind of fit the bill. There had to have been a reason that Tsukasa was so certain that he had killed Senku at the start.

Gen let it slide—for now. Why bother to ask for more details, Senku was right when he said that they would be seeing it for themselves soon enough.

"Fine, fine," he said aloud, leaning back with a lazy smile. "But if this plan of yours ends with something ridiculous I reserve the right to throw something at you. If nothing else you have to make sure that its entertaining for us."

Senku gave him a sidelong look. "That's a waste of materials."

"Not if it's popcorn."

"Don't waste the popcorn either. Do you have any idea how rare that is in Japan after humans were petrified for thousands of years and not around to cultivate it?"

The trip back to camp was a tense affair—though, unsurprisingly, Taiju didn't seem to notice. The oaf had far too much of a pep in his step for someone who had just unknowingly put their entire operation at risk. When they arrived, Yuzuriha was already prepped. Taiju had draped clothing over her like a makeshift dress, messily stitched together at the sides. Somehow, the uneven seams almost made it look more feminine—as if effort alone had earned it charm. Senku rolled his eyes. If she wanted something better once revived, their Crafts Club member could ten billion percent whip up something cleaner than *anything* Taiju, Senku, or even Tsukasa could slap together.

Step one, Senku thought to himself grimly. *Let's hope my acting holds up.*

The first move in this dangerous game? Make sure Tsukasa believed that Senku *didn't want him* going near the cave. That part was vital. It would've been ideal to hide

Yuzuriha entirely—to keep her out of sight until the plan was secure. But that was never going to happen. Not with Taiju involved. The big oaf would *never* go along with that.

Plus... She was his friend too.

"What the hell?" Senku said aloud, injecting just the right amount of confusion and irritation into his voice. He crouched beside the pot, frowning. "For some reason, we don't have enough revival fluid. Not even enough for one person."

Gen let out a knowing laugh, low and amused. "Ahhh, Senku-chan, really now… You're many things," Gen continued, leaning forward, his voice laced with fond mockery, "but 'bad at measuring' is not one of them. You knew exactly how much revival fluid you had—down to the microliter. So unless someone sneezed into the pot and vaporized half of it, that's a *ten billion percent* lie."

Ryusui raised an eyebrow, smirking. "He was laying a trap. Or at least a misdirection."

Chrome blinked. "Wait—he lied on purpose?"

"Obviously," Ukyo said quietly, arms folded. "He's trying to manipulate Tsukasa's attention. Make him think the cave is a weak point. Classic misdirection."

"And," Gen added with a chuckle, "pretty good acting, too. Not your usual forte, Senku-chan, but I'd give that performance at least a solid 7.5 out of 10." He grinned sideways. "Maybe even an 8, for the neck crack."

Senku gave a noncommittal grunt, but there was a flicker of satisfaction in his eyes. Across the room, Yuzuriha was watching the screen with a soft, unreadable expression. Her hands were folded neatly in her lap, but her knuckles were white.

"Even though it would've been smarter to hide me…" Yuzuriha murmured, her voice quiet but steady. "He didn't."

Taiju turned to her, nodding quietly, almost beaming at the thoughtful friendship they were hearing in Senku's internal monologue. They *knew*, of course—they had always known Senku cared—but it was rare to *hear* it, even in passing.

"He didn't want to wait," Taiju said softly.

Yuzuriha smiled. It was soft, her eyes bright. It wasn't just that he'd missed her. That was obvious now, in the way he hadn't hesitated to prioritize her even when logic pointed another direction. What struck her more was that—despite all his calculations, all his endless theories and probabilities—Senku had wanted the three of them to come back together.

And not for science. Not for progress.

For *her.*

For their friendship.

It was a good feeling. She didn't really have anyone other than Taiju and Senku. They were her family.

François tilted their head thoughtfully. "And yet, he still acknowledged your value as a craftsman. It was not sentiment alone."

"That's what makes it mean more," Yuzuriha said gently. "He didn't just want me back—he respected what I could do. Even in his head, where no one else would hear it."

Senku rolled his eyes. "Don't get carried away with the emotions. I mostly needed your hands for the mission."

Yuzuriha smiled at him—warm, unshaken.

Senku went quiet.

Taiju played right into it perfectly, “Did I really get it too soon?!”

“Relax,” Senku replied, his voice practically a verbal eye roll. “Just grab some more. We’ll hang back and play twenty questions while you’re gone. Do try and make it back quick, would you, big oaf?”

“Of course! I’ll be back before you know it!” Taiju said cheerfully, a small, excited smile on his face. He turned, ready to sprint off.

But he didn’t get far. In the blink of an eye, a heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder. Senku’s muscles tensed—only slightly—but enough. It was part of the plan, yes, but that didn’t make it *pleasant.* Tsukasa’s hand was the same one that had crushed stone. That had knocked out a lion. Even Taiju wasn’t guaranteed to be safe under that grip.

“I’m faster,” Tsukasa said, calm and even. “So it makes more sense for me to go. But I’ll need to know exactly where to find this miracle fluid.”

Hook. Line. And sinker.

Senku forced his body to stay relaxed. *This* was the moment. Everything would pivot around how well he could sell the next few moves.

“Ohhh~! Flawlessly executed deception!” Gen leaned in, grinning like a kid at a magic show. “He took that bait so cleanly it should’ve come with a side of wasabi.” His gaze flicked toward Senku. “I’d give that trap a 9.6 out of 10—points deducted only because Tsukasa nearly turned Taiju into fertilizer.”

Senku gave a one-shoulder shrug, casual as ever. “Misdirection only works when the target believes they’re making the decision themselves.” His eyes didn’t leave the screen as he added, almost offhandedly, “Page forty-two of that psychology handbook you wrote. The one with the red cover.”

There was a *beat*—and Gen blinked.

“Oh?” His voice lifted, sing-song and teasing, but his expression betrayed the flicker of something else underneath. “You *really* remembered the page number, Senku-chan?”

Senku smirked. “Perfect recall, Mentalist. Don’t get excited.”

Not that he’d admit it out loud, but he knew exactly what effect quoting that line would have. Predictable response. Good morale boost. Useful, really. (And maybe—just maybe—it was a little satisfying to see that grin.)

“Oh, *too late for that,*” Gen murmured under his breath, turning away just enough to hide the grin that wouldn’t go away. Senku-chan really was something else, that was way too smooth for someone who seemed to internally scream that they didn't wat to pursue anything.

“That’s *so insane,*” Chrome muttered, his eyes wide. “He *wanted* Tsukasa to go to the cave? Like, on *purpose?*”

From the side, Ukyo spoke without looking away from the screen. “He needed Tsukasa to feel like he was in control. That’s how you lead someone like him—give him power, then point it where you want it.” He paused, frowning faintly. “Still… doesn’t mean it’s safe.”

A laugh rang out from Ryusui as he slouched back into his seat. “Now *that’s* what I call living on the edge. Bluffing a lion-killer into thinking he’s got the upper hand? Chef’s kiss. But seriously, Senku, if he’d chosen to take Taiju with him instead, you planning to roll out plan D?”

Senku smirked, trying to push the Mentalist out of his mind rather unsuccessfully, “That was plan C.”

Chrome paled. “There was a plan D?!”

François, ever composed, adjusted the cuff of their sleeve. “A beautifully executed redirection. But I do wonder—was the outcome worth the proximity to failure?” Their gaze met Senku’s, calm but probing. “What if Tsukasa had decided to take Taiju along instead?”

Senku didn’t blink. “He wouldn’t have.”

“Confident,” Ryusui said, raising a brow.

“Logical,” Senku corrected. “Tsukasa already saw Taiju as the emotional one. Predictable, not a threat. Sending him would’ve been inefficient.”

Gen tilted his head, a glint of amusement in his eyes. “So you played Tsukasa’s ego against his instincts?”

He didn’t need Senku to confirm it. The signs were all there.

Tsukasa was a man of strength—he trusted his body more than anyone else’s. But he was also proud. Deep down, he believed he was the only one *worthy* of taking action. All Senku had to do was make it *look* like Taiju had stumbled and bumbled around a little too much, someone who required control like Tsukasa wouldn't put up with tht level of randomness when Senku was still around to present a threat. Plus, Tsukasa did firmly believe, deep to his ego, that he could take Taiju and Senku no matter what, at least at this state of rebuilding.

“Classic behavioral framing,” Gen continued, grinning wider now. “You didn’t tell him to go —you just let him come to the conclusion you *wanted.* Beautifully done, Senku-chan.”

“Exactly,” Senku said, voice flat. “He *had* to go himself. That was the only way the plan would work. And the only outcome I allowed.”

Taiju blinked slowly. “Wait… so I *wasn’t* in danger?”

Senku glanced at him. “You were loud, obvious, and completely genuine. You played the part perfectly.”

“Oh! Cool!” Taiju beamed. “...Wait. Was that a compliment?”

Senku didn’t answer. But the corner of his mouth twitched.

Yuzuriha placed a hand gently on Taiju’s arm, her voice low. “You could’ve gotten hurt.”

But Taiju only smiled, a little sheepish, a little clueless. “Aww, come on… It all worked out, right?” He looked around. “That's all that really matters. Plus you know Senku, he wouldn't allow anything like that to happen to either of us.”

Senku didn’t bother to hide his grin. His eyes narrowed slightly as he looked toward Tsukasa—why pretend? The guy would just read it as Senku feeling cornered, when in reality, he’d been running laps around him this entire time. So far, Tsukasa had been playing at *his* speed.

Of course he couldn’t resist the bait. People like him never could.

Once Tsukasa found the source of the miracle fluid, he’d make the predictable move—keep it for himself, just like the greedy landlords he claimed to despise. And the second he realized Senku’s plan involved reviving *everyone,* he’d try to shut it down. That part was inevitable. The logic was ironclad. There was a ten billion percent chance this was going to turn into a fight. Senku stayed quiet as Taiju—earnest, trusting Taiju—unwittingly gave away the location of one of the most important resources in the world.

A beat passed. Then Senku asked casually, stretching his arms overhead, “He should be pretty far by now, right?”

“Yeah, he was off like a bolt of lightning!”

Without another word, Senku launched into motion, pulling out the exact measurements he’d premixed and hidden in advance. Every movement was practiced, precise. He didn’t even glance up when he heard the shocked gasp from his friend.

“Let’s bring her back ASAP,” he said, pouring the solution into the dish, “Before he has the chance to come back.”

Chrome leaned forward, eyes wide. “Wait—wait, hold on! How long was Tsukasa gone before Senku started mixing that?!”

“Like… ten seconds?” Gen drawled, eyes sparkling with amusement. “Ten *brilliantly calculated* seconds.”

“Ten seconds,” Ryusui repeated with a grin. “That man punches lions and *sprints like a damn cheetah*. I still need this man, I'm not giving up he will work for me!”

Yuzuriha blinked. “Wait… so how fast *is* he, exactly?”

“Fast enough,” Ukyo said mildly, “That I’m not sure he actually obeys gravity.”

Gen placed a hand over his heart. “Ahh, the poetry of watching Senku race against a man who could probably *outrun light itself* if he really tried.” He turned toward Senku with a grin, sparky as ever, “And yet here you are, grinning like you’ve got *plenty* of time.”

“I *did* have time,” Senku replied, smirking. “I measured it.”

Taiju threw his hands in the air. “You *measured* how long it would take Tsukasa to run to the cave?!”

“I had a rough estimate of his stride length, muscle output, terrain friction—” Senku began.

He didn’t stop.

“—factored in wind resistance, the incline of the slope, the likelihood of overstepping due to overconfidence, and adjusted for fatigue based on his previous burst speed when chasing the lion. Given his acceleration curve and assuming a constant burst sprint, he’d need approximately sixty-four seconds round trip.”

A beat.

Senku added, voice perfectly level, “Seventy-eight seconds, if he gets distracted smashing adult statues along the way.”

Dead silence.

Gen blinked. “Wait. *Wait.* You *counted on* him murdering people to buy you time?”

Senku shrugged. “I calculated the probability of him destroying at least two statues on the way back at roughly seventy percent. Given his fixation, it was more likely than not.”

Chrome gaped. “You *weaponized* Tsukasa’s murder spree?!”

“He was going to do it anyway,” Senku said, utterly unmoved. “Might as well let him be useful.”

Taiju looked horrified. “Senku!”

“Relax,” Senku sighed, waving a hand. “The odds of revival after decapitation are high with Yuzuriha on statue duty with her glue. I wasn’t gambling with lives—I was adjusting for variables.”

Yuzuriha blinked. “...That’s the *most Senku* thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Isn’t it *glorious?*” Gen whispered dramatically, placing a hand to his chest. “He’s so cold it *loops back around* to brilliant.”

“Or terrifying,” Ukyo murmured.

Chrome let out a strangled sound, his expression amazed “That's bad!”

“But you said that there wasn’t enough fluid!? What’s going on?” Taiju blurted out, eyes wide.

Senku stirred the mixture, raising an eyebrow. “Do you really think I’d set out a container that was the wrong size?”

Taiju blinked. “No… no, you wouldn’t,” he breathed, realization sinking in. He knew Senku better than that.

Senku tried to steady his heartbeat—it was pounding in his chest, electric in his veins. That kind of rush, like being hit with a gust of wind so strong it stole the air from your lungs and left every nerve tingling. He wanted to grin, to laugh, to *move*—but he reined it in. That energy would be needed later.

“It was a calculated risk,” he said instead, voice steady. “I needed him gone before we revived her. Even if it meant giving away the cave’s location.”

He turned toward Taiju, voice lowering just slightly, serious now.

“Listen, Taiju. Tsukasa isn’t a good guy. He wants to stop us from reviving everyone—only bring back the young and the healthy. People he thinks are ‘pure.’ We can’t let that happen. Ten billion percent, we *have* to stop him.”

Taiju swallowed hard, nodding slowly.

Senku’s tone sharpened just a little more. “He wants to build a world where only the strong survive. That kind of thinking?” He met Taiju’s eyes. “It doesn’t move me. Not one millimeter.”

“The great Senku-chan, playing a high-stakes bluff while counting seconds and hiding his *giddy little adrenaline high.*”

Senku huffed from the corner. “It wasn’t giddy. It was… Efficient use of natural physiological response.”

Gen turned toward him, all faux sweetness. “Mmm-hmm~. You looked two seconds away from *vibrating through your own skin.*”

Ryusui crossed his arms, watching the playback thoughtfully. “So you lied to buy time, baited a superhuman into leaving camp, predicted he’d get distracted by statue murder, and then

dropped a truth bomb on Taiju while fighting the urge to *giggle.*”

“I didn’t *giggle,*” Senku muttered.

Yuzuriha tilted her head. “But the way you said it... how calmly you told Taiju that Tsukasa was dangerous. That wasn’t for show, was it?”

Senku’s fingers tapped against his leg.

It wasn’t.

Watching this scene again—he couldn’t unsee it. That thrill beneath the calm. That heat under his skin. His voice hadn’t wavered because he was confident in the plan. It hadn’t wavered because his brain had latched onto the situation like a puzzle too satisfying to ignore. *He’d loved it.* That exact moment—the risk, the calculation, the stakes. And worse? Now that he was watching it from the outside...

He could could still see their point.

Tsukasa had been a threat to his life, to his people, to everything they were building—and all Senku could think about in that moment was how fast his own brain was working. How sharp the pressure made him feel.

Gen, of course, was still watching him like a hawk. “So, Senku-chan… How long were you going to pretend that adrenaline rush wasn’t the *highlight* of your week?”

“Not the point,” Senku muttered.

Damned Mentalist, always making Senku think of things he'd rather not.

Science was meant to bridge the gap between the strong and the weak. That was the whole point. And now, it was about to become the most dangerous game Senku had ever played—A fun game.

"If you're saying that, something must've happened while I was gone, right?" Taiju asked, his voice unusually serious. "You don't have to explain. I trust you to make the right decision."

Perspective from the oaf. Still a little too earnest, a little too trusting—but Senku had never hated that about him.

"You're right," Senku said flatly. "Shishio Tsukasa is an awesome guy. He's strong." A pause. Then, with bite: "Too bad he just happens to be a murderer."

There wasn't time to linger. Senku handed the fluid over to Taiju and zipped around the clearing, placing a few precautions—emergency measures, trigger points. His mind spun through contingencies, angles, backup plans. He thought back to what he'd hidden the other day. Not enough. It would never be *enough.* But it had to be. If everything fell into place? They could pull it off.

"He really said Tsukasa was an awesome guy," Ryusui laughed, tossing his head back with a grin. "*Right before* calling him a murderer. Gotta admit, that's style."

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, eyes glinting with interest.

"And honestly? I respect the hell out of that kind of play. That's a man who knows what he wants and isn't afraid to twist the entire board to get it. High stakes, high risk, maximum return." His voice dropped slightly, with a note of appreciation that was almost reverent. "That's *greed,* baby. The best kind. Not for power or money—but for possibility. For the future. I really respect Senku's type of greed."

Gen's gaze was fixed on the screen, quieter than usual. "Mmm... It's definitely more than just style." His voice had a hint of something thoughtful, even tense. "It's Senku laying the groundwork. He's starting the psychological chess match. And it's not just for Tsukasa's sake—he's playing it for Taiju's benefit too. Trying to make sure he understands just enough... but not too much, not so much that it gives the plan away."

"He was already planning the worst-case scenario," Ukyo said quietly, eyes narrowed. "Precautions, traps, hidden resources… He wasn't just hoping for the best. He was preparing for the fallout."

Yuzuriha nodded slowly. “And still made sure I was safe first. Even with all that going on.”

Why hasn’t that oaf poured the fluid yet?! Doesn’t he get there’s a time crunch?

Senku rushed over, brows furrowed. “Did you forget we’re in a hurry, you big oaf?” Without waiting for a reply, he grabbed the vase and tipped it forward, letting the fluid pour over Yuzuriha with absolutely no finesse.

“You just *dumped* it?!” Taiju flailed. “We should be, you know, *more ceremonial* or something!”

Not the time, Senku thought, heart thudding in his chest.

They waited a beat.

No cracking.

“Ahhh?! Why isn’t it working, Senku?!”

Interesting, Senku thought, eyes narrowing slightly as he stared at the unmoving statue. Damn this petrification—every time he thought he understood it, it offered another layer.

“A few things,” he started, his tone slipping into a familiar rhythm—the kind of excited focus that only hit when his brain lit up with scientific theory. “One: the petrification works similarly to cryostasis. The stone shell acts like a protective barrier, maybe even formed from the trace metals in the body. I’ve got a theory that some unknown mechanism caused a phase shift, transforming matter into its petrified state.”

He crouched next to the statue, studying it.

“We already know that if someone was *mentally active* during petrification, they can be revived with just nitric acid—no nital needed—because they’re burning enough energy to break down those atomic connections on their own.”

Taiju looked completely lost. “Wait—so...?”

Senku held up a finger. “Which means, theoretically, anyone *could* be revived with just acid... but it’d take a ridiculous amount of time. Do the math—3700 years at an average of 400 calories burned daily from mental activity alone? That’s over two terajoules.”

He tapped his fingers together, running the numbers aloud. “If someone wasn’t mentally active at all? Didn’t think a single thought during petrification? Then, based on the rate of internal breakdown, they’d need...” He paused, calculating. “Roughly 5492 years. Give or take a few months.”

Taiju stared at him, slack-jawed.

"So. Yeah. That's why we needed the *right* fluid."

There was a long pause after Senku finished his math, the numbers still echoing faintly in the stunned silence around them.

Then, from the back, Francois finally spoke, her tone as even as ever.

"Fascinating," she said, folding her arms behind her back. "Only he could casually drop a *two-terajoule* thought experiment into a high-stress crisis and treat it as routine exposition." Her gaze flicked toward the statue of Yuzuriha, then back to Senku. "And only Senku would take a moment of deep emotional urgency and respond by giving a scientific lecture."

They truly needed him for the company when this was all over, Ryusui seemed to feel the same from the slight smirk that their boss was giving them.

Senku gave a satisfied little smirk. "Hey, if people understood the science, they wouldn't panic."

Francois tilted her head slightly. "Yes. Though I do wonder if the panic might be preferable to the part where you gleefully calculated a 5,492-year natural delay in revival."

Gen let out a low whistle. "*Mm~, she's got you there, Senku-chan. Even I didn't think you'd turn this into a full seminar mid-revival scene.*"

Francois gave a small, graceful nod. "Still, the theory is sound. And quite elegant in its logic —if one can look past the terrifying implications."

"You lost me, Senku! It's so complicated!"

Senku sighed. "I'll keep it basic, then. If just one part of the organism comes into contact with the nital, it should start a chain reaction that ripples across the entire body.

The petrification undoes itself."

And then—

The stone cracked.

A sharp line split through the statue's surface, fragments falling away in delicate pieces. Senku allowed himself a small, genuine smile—for just a moment. The three of them, finally together again. Just like they'd promised. Just as quickly, he buried the expression, folding his arms as he watched the inevitable unfold. Taiju was crying—loudly, of course. Senku didn't blame him. 3,700 years of waiting and imagining this moment would do that to anyone. But now really wasn't the time for an emotional outburst.

Then a familiar voice—soft, slightly hoarse but unmistakably hers.

"…Is that you, Taiju?"

Senku's eyes flicked up.

Nostalgic. That was the only way to describe the sound of her voice after all this time.

Playback resumes in 15 minutes

Chrome blinked fast. "*That's bad!*" he blurted, eyes wide with excitement. "That's *still* insane to me! Like—we're just watching a miracle happen. *Real-time!*"

He leaned forward, practically vibrating in his seat. "I mean, come on! A chain reaction that undoes *stone* from just a single point of contact?! That's some next-level chemistry, Senku! You *actually* figured out how to break down that shell from the inside *just* by giving it the right starting push!"

He made a spiraling motion with his hands. "And the way it spreads across the whole body—*bad!* That's so bad! Like lighting a fuse on science itself!"

Senku raised an eyebrow but didn't interrupt. Chrome wasn't done.

“I didn’t even know petrification could *do* that! What you said about trace metals forming the shell? And cryostasis? Like what we did with Tsukasa?! I’m keeping up this time! Mostly! And even when I don’t get every piece, I *still get the spirit of it!*”

He turned to Senku, eyes practically sparkling. “Man, this is what I *live* for. Weird science, ancient mystery tech, *and* explosions? This is the real stuff.”

Senku gave the tiniest nod of approval. Chrome continued to come a long way, it lessened the weight on Senku's shoulders.

Francois folded her hands neatly. “Of course, the miracle lies not in mystery, but in execution. What is remarkable is that Senku-san predicted the chain reaction with such precision. And chose to explain it… while waiting for it to happen.”

Gen chuckled. “Oh, *of course* he did. Can’t miss a chance to narrate his own success like a documentary voiceover.”

Senku grunted. “Tch. It’s basic scientific process. A hypothesis, tested and confirmed by observable result.”

Ukyo stood quietly just off to the side with Yuzuriha. He kept his voice low so he wouldn't interrupt, but it was clear he’d been watching the screen with just as much attention as the others.

"Feels strange, doesn’t it?" he said softly, just enough for her to hear.

Yuzuriha looked over, her gaze gentle. "Watching yourself wake up?"

Ukyo nodded. “You don’t think about what it looks like from the outside, not really. Then suddenly… there it is. A moment the whole world waited for. And you’re the one on the screen.”

She was quiet for a second, eyes fixed on the playback—on herself lying still in the grass, stone cracking away, Taiju's voice tremulous with joy.

"…I feel like I'm watching someone else," she admitted. "Like it should've happened to another version of me. One that never had to wait so long."

Ukyo tilted his head. "But it *did* happen to you. That's what makes it so powerful."

She met his gaze.

He gave her a small smile. "So… welcome back. Again."

Yuzuriha's smile softened with real warmth, her voice quiet but sure. "Thanks, Ukyo."

They both turned back to the screen, just in time to hear Senku call out something overly sciency that made Chrome yell *"BAD!"* again.

Ukyo's smile twitched.

"…Still the same team," he murmured.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter!

Was anyone expecting this?! I jumped in without warning, full speed ahead on the character additions—I'm the worst.

I'm totally open to ideas for interlude reactions that won't be shown in the actual anime. For example, Jeireilost suggested some Byakuya and Senku moments, which I absolutely agree with! I'll probably explore Senku's time in Africa studying Ebola since I find that part of his life fascinating and want to expand on it. I could also do something with Xeno and Senku or explore certain characters' reactions to petrification—like Gen's, though his was the most interesting one for me to write. Maybe even Senku reading Gen's book in the past—that could be hilarious.

If you have any thoughts or suggestions, I'd love to hear them!

Thank you all so much for the support on my comeback! I'm going to try to stay active and engaged in this fandom for as long as my ADHD lets me!

Chapter 11: Episode 3 Part 2

Chapter Notes

> Not gonna lie this chapter is one that I'm not particularly proud of. Something about it just doesn't feel right, but I decided that I would just post it. I spent all day yesterday trying to figure out what it was but something just seemed off. Oh well, just gonna focus back up on my Ebola Arc reaction, which should be the next chapter. If you want to read that material before we react to it, it's my story Code Fever.
>
> I'll see you guys again in a few days! This upcoming chapter is huge and it's just gonna take a few days. I appreciate everyone for hanging in there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> Taiju was crying, and it made Senku feel awkward—like he was intruding on something private. But they didn't have nearly enough time to worry about things like that. Still… giving them a few seconds? That was just logical, really. So, Senku glanced off to the side and let the moment breathe.
>
> "It feels like I've been asleep forever," Yuzuriha murmured, her voice soft. "But still… it feels like you saved me. You did, right? You saved me? Thank you."

Kohaku leaned forward on her knees, smiling softly. "Well… if we had to come back from a break to *anything* after the break this was a pretty beautiful moment to start with."

Francois gave a quiet nod, arms folded behind their back. "It has an elegant weight to it. Simple. Human. And refreshingly sincere."

Yuzuriha laughed nervously, her cheeks pink as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "It's a little weird seeing myself like that…"

She paused, voice softer as she looked back at the screen. "I don't remember everything perfectly from those first few minutes. But… I was scared. More than I let on. And I think I was just so happy to see Taiju that I didn't want to show it. Plus Taiju was already crying enough for the both of us..."

Taiju let out a dramatic groan and slumped forward. “Aw, man! I was just so happy you were back!”

“I think it’s sweet,” Yuzuriha said, bumping her shoulder lightly into his. “Even if it’s kind of embarrassing seeing it now.”

Yuzuriha glanced sideways at Taiju—still flustered, still red in the face—and something in her chest tightened. She’d known he cared, of course she had, but seeing it like this… watching the sheer relief, the tears, the rawness of it all—it hit different. She hadn’t realized how much he’d been carrying. How deeply he’d held onto hope for her. And even though it was a little embarrassing to see now, part of her felt incredibly lucky. Lucky that someone like him had waited. Had cried. Had *cared* that much.

Kohaku, meanwhile, was clutching her knees to her chest, bright-eyed and hiding a grin behind her hand. She didn’t say a word, but the energy radiating off her screamed *they’re so cute*. Her gaze flicked to Senku and Gen like she was fighting every instinct not to make a comment.

Gen, ever the opportunist for emotional subtext, leaned in with a glint in his eye, one sleeve lifted theatrically to cover his mouth as he whispered toward Senku, “Mmm~ do you think seeing all this on screen will *finally* get those two together?” His voice was just low enough not to carry—barely.

Senku didn’t even look at him. “Tch. We’re not here for romance, Mentalist.”

Gen smirked behind his sleeve. “Maybe *you’re* not. But some of us appreciate a good emotional payoff.” His gaze slid toward Taiju and Yuzuriha, whose faces were both varying shades of red. “And I’d call this one long overdue~.”

Gen’s smirk lingered as Senku deflected with his usual brand of indifference—but his eyes narrowed slightly, thoughtful behind the lazy curve of his sleeve. *We’re not here for romance, Mentalist.* Maybe. Maybe not. But Gen remembered what they saw back at the start of all this. The so-called *love potion.* The way Senku had leaned into Taiju’s awkward crush, had pressed the point with calculated nudges and sardonic encouragement—nudges that, in

hindsight, looked suspiciously like *matchmaking.* Not just for laughs, but with intent. To the point that Senku had bet a not inconsiderable amount of money on them actually getting together.

Gen didn't say any of that aloud. But he did let his eyes flick toward Senku's profile for half a second longer than necessary, something sly and knowing curling beneath the surface.

Not here for romance, huh? He'd believe that… ten billion percent less than Senku thought he would.

> The tears were still falling from the oaf as she slowly sat up, dazed and blinking in the light.
>
> It felt… *good* to see them together again. Senku crossed his arms and looked away, feigning disinterest—but the corner of his mouth twitched, just slightly.
>
> "It wasn't me," Taiju said quickly, rubbing at his eyes. "It was Senku. He's the one who made the fluid. He spent a whole year working on it."

Gen leaned over again, sleeve partially covering his mouth in faux discretion still, "*'Good to see them together again,'* huh? That doesn't sound very *scientific* of you, Senku-chan. Not matchmaking, you say?"

Senku didn't even blink, though there was the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Do I really seem like the matchmaking type, Mentalist?"

Gen's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Oh, I don't know. You *did* attempt a fake love potion scam back at the start of this whole thing…"

Off to the side, Yuzuriha smiled quietly, her fingers tightening just a little around her knees. "He really meant it… He missed me that much…"

Taiju was already going red in the face, frantically waving his arms. "I-I wasn't crying *that* much! It just—it was a long time, okay?!"

Across the room, Kohaku was absolutely trying not to smile—but she was *definitely* smiling. Her fists were balled against her thighs and her eyes were just a little too wide with secondhand excitement. She didn't say a word, but the way she leaned forward ever so slightly gave her away. *She was invested*.

As good a time as any, Senku thought to himself, stepping forward. They needed to make a decision—and fast. He wished he could give them all the time in the world. Time to get their act together, to stop dancing around whatever it was between them. But that would have to wait until after they dragged humanity back from the brink of extinction.

"Sorry to interrupt your little moment," he said dryly, "But we need to decide what to do before Tsukasa gets back. There are only two options, so choose carefully."

That wasn't entirely true. Each plan branched off into dozens of contingencies. But they didn't need to know that yet.

"Plan A: You two run. Right now. As far and as fast as you can."

"Plan B: We stick together and fight to stop Tsukasa's murder spree—using the weapons of civilization."

"*COME ON, MAN!*" Taiju exploded, recovering from his tears freakishly fast. "Obviously we'll stay and fight by your side!"

Senku didn't acknowledge the small flicker of warmth those words stirred in his chest. He just crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. If he gave it too much room, it would crawl under his skin—make him slow, make him soft. Still, something about Taiju's unwavering certainty, the absolute lack of hesitation, hit harder than he'd expected. *Of course Taiju would say that. Of course he'd mean it, too.*

Senku exhaled slowly through his nose. "Tch. Big oaf."

"I mean, really—what kinda people do you think we are?!"

"Mhm!" Yuzuriha nodded, eyes burning with resolve. "I have no clue what's going on, but I'll help however I can!"

Kohaku narrowed her eyes, arms crossed tightly over her chest. She didn't say a word—but the look she leveled at Senku was nothing short of lethal. It wasn't just irritation. It was personal. The kind of glare that said *you interrupted my OTP, and I will not forgive you lightly.* Senku, catching the look from the corner of his eye, felt the faint stirrings of unease crawl up his spine. He hadn't seen a predator glare like that since Tsukasa had offered to murder them all for ideology. This, somehow, felt *worse*.

Gen clocked it immediately and subtly leaned toward Senku. “Uh-oh.”

Senku didn't look at him. “Yeah.”

“She’s got the look,” Gen whispered, covering his mouth with his sleeve like he was shielding himself from a radioactive reaction. “The fangirl one. You know the one.”

Senku exhaled sharply through his nose. “I know the one.”

Kohaku said nothing. Just turned back to the screen, expression unreadable but intense—like she was *willing* the past versions of Taiju and Yuzuriha to get it together already. And maybe murder Senku a little for cutting in.

“I didn’t realize we had a deadline on emotional resolution,” Senku muttered, arms crossed. “Then again, those two have been dancing around this for years.”

“I thought you *weren’t* playing matchmaker?” Gen asked, smile all teeth and implication.

"Drop it, Mentalist." Senku rolled his eyes, a finger picking at his ear.

Still... This felt weird to watch, all thoughts of matchmaking aside. It felt distant and familiar all at once. That version of him, stepping forward, laying out the plans like it was all simple, manageable, already handled. The calm in his voice. The confidence. Senku hadn't really realized that he looked like that when he was talking.

God, I looked composed. I don't really think I was.

Taiju yelling. Yuzuriha nodding. Both of them jumping in with no hesitation. No data. No backup. Just sheer, ridiculous trust.

A small breath slipped through Senku’s nose. Those two... They didn’t even ask what the risks were. Didn’t demand guarantees. Just stood there—like they always did. Even now, it surprised him a little. How fast they’d chosen him. He let his arms drop to his sides, away from picking at his ear, those two friends of his were amazing. Senku wasn't completely sure that he deserved them, not that he would change anything.

It wasn’t strategy that made them stay.

It was me.

Senku glanced at them, just briefly, calculating the risk. Taiju’s fists were already clenched, his whole body tensed with outrage, and Yuzuriha’s jaw was tight, her posture defensive. He took a half step forward, deliberately placing himself between them and where Tsukasa would likely emerge. “I’m not trying to make assumptions,” he said, voice carefully even. “It just seems logical to give you both the chance to flee.”

He didn’t say *I don’t want you hurt.* He definitely didn’t say *I’ve got this* covered, because he really didn't. But the implication was clear in his tone. If they stayed, they’d only be in the blast radius. And for all Tsukasa’s idealism, Senku had no doubt he would go through anyone who stood in his way.

“Listen, Senku!” Taiju’s voice rose, righteous and loud, fists trembling. “If Tsukasa is *killing* people, then we—"

“So I’m killing people?”

Tsukasa’s voice cut through the conversation like a knife—cool, calm, and almost amused.

Senku stiffened slightly. He was early. Not ideal. But still within the margin of error. They could work with this.

Tsukasa stepped forward, voice smooth and unsettlingly relaxed. “Huh. That’s a bit dramatic, isn’t it? I’d say it’s a matter of perspective.”

He smiled faintly, and the air seemed to grow heavier.

“I call it *culling.*”

Kohaku's arms folded, expression darkening. "*Culling?* He says that like it makes it better. He's still talking about shattering people like they're nothing."

Yuzuriha's jaw tightened, and even though she knew what was coming, she still flinched a little hearing it again on-screen. The ease in Tsukasa's voice was what made it worse.

"He sounded so calm," she murmured. "Like it didn't bother him at all."

"Because it didn't," Ukyo said quietly, arms folded.

His eyes were sharp, tracking Tsukasa's image on the screen like he was back in those forests again—like the man might step straight out of the footage. But behind that calm tone was something more complicated. Something quieter. Wary. Regretful.

"That's the problem."

He didn't elaborate at first. But his fingers twitched against his sleeve—like he was resisting the urge to cover his ears.

"Tsukasa always said things like that," Ukyo murmured, voice low enough that it felt more like a confession. "He sounded calm. Rational. Like he'd thought it through a hundred times. That's what made it so dangerous. You *wanted* to believe he had a point. That there was logic in it. But it was always wrapped around something darker. Something colder."

He exhaled slowly.

"And the worst part? He believed it. Completely."

Ukyo's gaze flicked toward Senku. Just for a moment. "I used to think maybe you were the reckless one. Chasing ideas without regard for what it would cost. But watching this again…" His voice trailed off, eyes returning to the screen.

“He looked *right*. He always believed what he was saying, and that was what gave him the pull he had on us."

Ryusui let out a slow breath. “That man has *presence,* I’ll give him that.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “But philosophizing murder doesn’t make it less murder.”

“Actually—” Gen leaned forward, voice low and deliberate, “—that’s exactly what he’s trying to do. Philosophize it. Semantically, *culling* refers to the selective removal of the weak or unwanted from a group—usually for the health of the population.”

Chrome blinked. “Like with animals?”

“Exactly,” Gen nodded, eyes still locked on the screen. “Herd control. Disease prevention. But applying it to humans? That’s when the language stops being a descriptor and becomes a justification.”

Senku let out a soft *tch,* but said nothing.

Gen glanced sideways at him, but didn’t press. Instead, he looked back at the others. “He’s dressing it up in philosophy, but there’s nothing noble about what he’s doing. He just doesn’t want to call it what it really is. In history we have plenty of examples of men and woman who took morals into their own hands in much the same way. They created crusades of their beliefs and 'culled' along the way. Doesn't change what he was doing, however.”

“Murder,” Kohaku snapped.

“Systematic murder,” Francois agreed, calm but cold.

Murder, culling, Same difference. Tsukasa didn’t make one millimeter of sense. He wasn’t even trying to hide his intentions anymore. Senku let out a low chuckle, more

rueful than amused, his grin sharp and tense. One hand reached toward the first step of his prep. It wouldn't be enough—he knew that. This was just the opening move, a stalling tactic at best. He'd already calculated the speeds involved. No matter what angle he ran the numbers from, it wouldn't be enough.

Crumbled bits of petrified stone hit the ground, skittering in broken pieces.

An eye was visible in one of them.

Senku's heart kicked. Shit.

The oaf was going to do something stupid.

Taiju bolted toward Tsukasa.

Senku's shoulders tensed instantly. *Not good.* Tsukasa could take Taiju apart without breaking a sweat. Even if Taiju *did* try to fight back—and he ten billion percent *wouldn't,* not with a clear head—it wouldn't matter. He wasn't built for this kind of battle.

Which meant Senku needed to provide some kind of distraction. Now.

Fine. That was Plan B, Route 5.

Worst possible route for Plan B, but… it was still accounted for.

The room had gone silent.

Uncomfortably silent.

No one said anything at first—not even Gen, who usually filled dead air like it was second nature. Everyone's eyes were glued to the screen, bodies tense, posture tight. Kohaku had her arms folded, shoulders rigid, jaw set like she was holding back the urge to leap through the screen and help. Chrome looked like he was gripping the edge of his seat a little too hard, knuckles white. Even Ukyo's usual calm had frayed at the edges—his brows drawn just enough to give him away.

It was the kind of silence that stretched. Dread coiled in the chest and settled heavy, like waiting for a detonation.

Gen opened his mouth, maybe to ease them into something lighter—but Ryusui beat him to it.

"Hah!" The navigator let out a low whistle, breaking the tension like a crack through ice. “No wonder you’re so damn good at planning, Senku. I bet you’re *terrifying* in a chess match.”

He leaned back in his chair with that familiar self-assured grin. “Or poker. Or shogi. Hell, throw in battleship while you’re at it.”

That earned a few quiet, grateful exhales from the group.

Gen blinked, then chuckled behind his sleeve, shifting his posture just slightly toward Senku. “Careful, Ryusui~ You’re feeding his ego.”

Senku caught it—*of course* he did. The setup was obvious, but effective. He knew the exact chemical composition of the tension in the room, and he knew when to stir it instead of letting it boil, especially when it was their Mentalist who clearly wanted to break the tension.

So he leaned into it.

Turning toward them with a gleam in his eye and an exaggerated, smug grin, Senku raised a single brow. “*Obviously* I’d wipe the floor with you,” he said. “Why do you think I avoid playing games with amateurs?”

Chrome sputtered. “Wait—*you’ve* never played any of us!”

“Exactly,” Senku said without missing a beat. “Why bother when the outcome’s predetermined?”

That earned a real laugh from Gen and a mock-scowl from Chrome, which only helped shake the last of the heaviness loose.

Senku reached for the crossbow he'd crafted and hidden earlier, fingers moving with precision even as his pulse kicked up. He knew full well that Tsukasa was fast enough that it probably wouldn't matter. Still, he took careful aim, mind already flashing with numbers and trajectories. The shot needed to fly just past the shoulder—close enough to provoke, but not close enough to harm. Hitting Tsukasa would be reckless. Fatal, even. A wound like that in the Stone World could ten billion percent mean death.

His heartbeat was elevated—not from fear, but anticipation. That sharp edge of calculation, the weight of a dangerous gamble. This was the kind of situation that made his brain spark. He hated that he liked it, but he couldn't deny the clarity it brought.

Senku adjusted his stance without thinking. He'd seen Luis practice with similar weapons back in Africa—had memorized the way he angled his weight, the fluid arc of his elbow, the moment of release. He knew the mechanics. Knew what to do.

If he was wrong about Tsukasa being able to catch the arrow—if this miscalculation became reality—it would be on him.

The arrow loosed with a sharp *twang*, slicing through the air like a warning shot.

Chrome's mouth fell open. "Did Senku just—use a weapon?! Like, a real one?!"

Ryusui let out a low whistle. "Not just any weapon. That stance. That aim. That was math-based precision. Beautifully done."

Yuzuriha blinked. "I didn't even know he knew how to do that…"

"He hates weapons," Kohaku muttered, frowning. "Why would he—"

"No, he doesn't," Gen said, watching Senku closely, his usual smirk absent for once. "He avoids them. Seems to prefer arming others instead. That's different than hating them."

He tapped his temple lightly, expression unreadable for a beat as he turned back to the screen.

Because now that he was really thinking about it—*really* thinking—it made sense, didn't it? Senku didn't mind others taking up arms. He would plan battles. Strategize. Build bombs if needed. Arm crossbows. Create traps. Craft every instrument of war down to the smallest detail if it meant securing the future of humanity.

But he never held the blade himself.

Gen knew why now. Or at least, he thought he did.

It wasn't some lofty moral code or fear of blood. Though that likely played a part in it as well. No, it was colder—and somehow kinder—than that. It was the weight of a brain that remembered *everything.* Senku didn't just recall equations or chemical formulas. He remembered *faces.* Actions. Results. And if he held the weapon, if he dealt the blow, if *he* was the one to cross that line… Perfect recall. That was the price of a genius brain of Senku's caliber. Most people could lie to themselves, over time. Forget what they'd done, convince themselves it wasn't that bad. But not Senku.

Senku would remember *everything,* down to the angle of the swing, the sound of impact, the expression in someone's eyes when they realized what was about to happen.

A bloodless war hadn't been just strategic. It might have been the only kind he could *live with.*

Senku didn't respond at first. Just kept his eyes on the screen. When the silence pressed in, he shrugged. "They remind me of someone," he said, tone even. "Luis. If it matters, the TV will show it."

The group exchanged glances, but no one pushed. That didn't change the interest, especially when it came to the groups archer. Ukyo nodded slowly, accepting that they might not get to know the details, but still interested regardless, "He didn't hesitate. But he still aimed wide. That's impressive restraint."

Gen leaned forward, trying to ignore his previous theory for now. His chin resting on his hand, watching the projection of Senku calculate, move, and shoot in the same breath. *A man*

who can handle a weapon is hot, he thought privately, lips twitching at the irony, the thought did wonders to push out the more grim theories that ran through his mind.

Ukyo's gaze lingered on the screen a little longer than the others, arms crossed, thoughtful. "His aim was clean. Even without experience, the form was… refined. Like he was mimicking someone else's muscle memory. Luis, I guess."

Ryusui smirked. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Ukyo nodded slightly. "Maybe. Target practice, sometime? Just out of curiosity. I want to see how he holds up when it's not a one-shot scenario."

Senku didn't look over. "Tch. I'm not trying to be some sharpshooter."

"But you've got the instincts," Ukyo replied calmly. "And the math. That makes you better than half the people I trained with, probably."

Senku huffed, scratching at the back of his head. He didn't like the idea of turning this into some kind of habit—but the point of all this was to build trust, wasn't it? Bonds. That's what this whole mess of a playback was for. And Ukyo wasn't the type to ask things lightly, "… Fine, We'll try it sometime. But if I beat you, you're not allowed to sulk."

Ukyo gave a quiet smile. "I won't."

Senku side-eyed him, clearly unamused.

Just as predicted, Tsukasa caught the arrow.

Senku felt a wave of momentary relief crash over him—almost enough to make his shoulders drop. Almost. But there was no time for that. Tsukasa moved like a bullet, twisting mid-motion and slamming his leg into Taiju with terrifying precision. Senku's brain was already calculating the force of impact, the torque from that spin, the absurd

velocity behind Tsukasa's momentum. That kick could've folded steel—so what it should've done to a human body didn't bear thinking about.

And yet—

Taiju stayed standing.

Senku huffed a grin, equal parts disbelief and pride. "Ten billion percent insane," he muttered to himself.

Tsukasa landed, eyes narrowed with something dangerously close to curiosity. "No one's ever taken my full-force kick and remained standing," he said coolly. "But even more interesting… was the feeling that you just refused to attack me.

Chrome nearly jumped to his feet. "*That's bad!*" he gasped, eyes wide in admiration. "I mean —*bad* in a good way! That should've *flattened* him!"

Yuzuriha's breath hitched, her eyes shimmering with alarm. "Taiju…"

Ryusui barked a laugh, loud and full of delight. "You truly are *perfect* for my crew! Who needs armor when you've got *that* skull?"

But behind the booming bravado and the sweeping gestures, something sharpened in Ryusui's eyes as he watched the screen. That hit had been *real.* Tsukasa wasn't just playing around—there was precision behind that kick, force that could have shattered ribs, crushed lungs, ended someone.

And Taiju had *stood there* and taken it.

Ryusui wasn't the type to be easily impressed by brute strength alone. He preferred skill, cunning, leverage—things that could be used like sails against the wind. But this? This kind of sheer, immovable durability? That was the kind of thing you couldn't fake. It wasn't luck. It wasn't arrogance. It was the sort of trait that, in the world they were trying to rebuild, could be just as valuable as genius.

More than that—it was loyalty in action. Ryusui's grin softened just slightly, his thoughts drifting toward his crew, his ship, the kind of people he'd trust to keep sailing through storms. Taiju had the look of someone who didn't understand how to give up. Not when it counted.

And Ryusui could respect that. No—he could *use* that. The man might be dense as a steel bulkhead, but that only made him the kind of unshakable foundation any captain would kill to have underfoot.

He leaned back, folding his arms as the screen kept playing, still grinning like a pirate who'd just struck gold. *Sturdy,* he thought, amused. *No. That one's damn near unsinkable.*

Watching his own ridiculous feat, Taiju let out a sheepish laugh. "I really didn't think it'd hurt *that* much..."

Senku turned to him, brows furrowed. "I couldn't tell what you were going to do," he admitted. "Your muscles were flexed like you were about to strike. You looked like you were going to attack—and I know you. You're not the type who fights unless there's no other option. So what gives?"

Taiju blinked, surprised. "Oh! Nah, I wasn't gonna hit him. I just… wanted to block him. Get in the way. I figured if I could stop him even for a second, it'd give you time to do something smart." He grinned, rubbing his arm. "Guess I overdid it a little."

Senku studied him, then huffed. "Your body language was screaming *attack.* I should've accounted for your dramatic flair."

Ukyo leaned forward, intrigued. "That's interesting, though. Tsukasa felt the same. He thought Taiju was going to hit him—and then he didn't. That kind of hesitation might've thrown him off."

"Or intrigued him," Gen added, eyes thoughtful. "It's hard to rattle someone like Tsukasa, but Taiju not fighting back? That's a different kind of pressure. When it comes to any kind of strength even with who we have revived now, only Taiju comes close.

"

Francois nodded. "A deviation from expected behavior can be just as disarming as a well-placed strike."

Kohaku’s arms were crossed, but her grin was unmistakable. “Still, that was a full-force blow. I’d like to spar with you sometime, Taiju. See how well you can block *me.*”

Taiju immediately panicked. “Please don’t!”

"I don't hit anyone! You can punch me, kick me, whatever you want—but I'm telling you, you *have* to stop breaking those statues! Because killing is *wrong!*" Taiju shouted at the top of his lungs.

Senku felt his eye twitch as he stared at him, incredulous. What kind of statement was that? Was it supposed to be a demand? A threat? There was *nothing* behind it but sheer moral insistence. No leverage. No logic. Just... Taiju being Taiju.

He really was something else.

Tsukasa’s calm in response was borderline unnerving. “Taiju, let me make sure I understand you,” he said, slowly. “You're saying I can hit you as much as I like—*as long* as I stop breaking the statues?”

“Yeah! Exactly!” Taiju replied, completely serious.

“I’ll give him this,” Ryusui said, smirking. “That’s a hell of a way to defend your beliefs.”

Taiju, now beet red, threw his hands up. “I *didn’t* think it through! I just couldn’t let him keep breaking people!”

Senku side-eyed him with a huff. “Ten billion percent obvious, big oaf.”

Gen covered his mouth with one sleeve, eyes twinkling. “Still… there’s something strangely noble about it. Insane, but noble. Like a knight with no armor offering to tank a cannonball in the name of love and peace.”

Taiju let out a strangled, flustered laugh, his face turning bright red. “Wha—! D-Don’t say it like that, Gen! I wasn’t thinking about anything romantic or knightly or—ahhh!” He waved his hands, eyes wide. “I just didn’t want anyone to get hurt, okay?!”

Tsukasa’s hand came up to cover his mouth. It was a rare crack in his composure—surprise, maybe even disbelief. Senku nearly laughed, if the situation weren’t so damn serious. Clearly, Tsukasa had never encountered anyone quite like Taiju before.

His lips twitched against his will. It was just so absurd.

So *Taiju*.

"I don't understand," Tsukasa said at last, calm but visibly thrown. "You're not making any kind of deal."

He genuinely sounded confused—like the logic of it had short-circuited his brain.

Ryusui let out a breathy laugh, amusement gleaming in his eyes as he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “He broke Tsukasa’s brain. That’s gotta be a first. I don't think even our mentalist could inflict that much mental damage.”

There was a sharp inhale beside him—Gen stifling a laugh with one purple sleeve, shoulders trembling. “Ohhh~ I’m dying,” he whispered, voice cracking under the weight of his grin. “Tsukasa looks like he just got handed a riddle written in interpretive dance. That poor man.”

Senku, arms crossed and expression unreadable, watched the moment replay on the screen. Even now, Tsukasa’s face shifted from stoic to something that almost resembled *confusion*. Senku’s mind ticked through every possibility—body language, tone, the delay in response—and yeah. Gen and Ryusui weren’t wrong. Taiju had broken something. Now that they weren't enemies anymore, Senku found it a lot less harrowing to find that absolutely hilarious

Gen leaned slightly in Ryusui’s direction, smirk slipping back into place. “Though I *do* take offense,” he said smoothly, “I *could* break him. I’d just need five uninterrupted minutes… and a tragic childhood metaphor.”

Senku huffed softly through his nose. Of course Gen would say that. And even more annoyingly, Senku believed it.

Ten billion percent, their Mentalist was impressive like that.

Senku noticed the subtle shift in Tsukasa's eyes—a glint of something colder, more dangerous—and the urge to laugh disappeared instantly. His spine straightened, instinctively, his entire body on alert.

Then came the words, calm and lethal:

"That girl you just revived... what if I told you I'd kill her instead?"

The statement wasn't barked or snarled. It was spoken like a hypothesis. A possibility Tsukasa wanted them to consider.

Senku narrowed his eyes. He didn't think Tsukasa *wanted* to hurt Yuzuriha—not really. But that didn't mean he wouldn't do it, not if it furthered his goals. Tsukasa was the type who weighed options rationally, dissected resistance like it was just another variable in the equation. And in the hands of someone *that* powerful, logic could be more dangerous than rage.

Taiju froze, his whole body locking up. His eyes widened, staring into the calm, unreadable ones of their opponent.

Then, without a word, he stepped forward.

And planted himself in front of Yuzuriha.

A wall of muscle, trembling slightly, but immovable.

"I don't think it was personal," Yuzuriha said quietly. Her voice didn't waver, but her gaze was distant. "I don't think he *cared* who I was. Just that I was there."

Gen didn't speak right away—his attention still flicking between Yuzuriha and the screen. But his fingers moved slightly, as if jotting down mental notes. Then, softer: "He wasn't *testing* her, exactly. He was testing Senku's *attachment*. And the fastest way to confirm how to use someone's bonds against them is to target the one they've just sacrificed logic for."

Senku, still watching the screen, didn't react at first. But he did exhale—just once—and gave a faint shake of his head.

"He wasn't wrong," he muttered. "But he wasn't right either."

Gen leaned in just slightly, voice low, measured, almost casual—if you didn't know him. "For someone who pegged Tsukasa as a threat from the start, I have to ask—what exactly is it you're calculating here, Senku-chan? Because from where I sit, you're acting like he's still got a moral boundary buried somewhere in that skull of his."

Senku's eyes stayed fixed on the screen, but his jaw ticked. "I'm not calculating morality. That's your department."

"Mmm." Gen gave a thoughtful hum. "Psychologically speaking, there's a term for what Tsukasa's doing—rationalized displacement. Framing his violence as purification lets him bypass cognitive dissonance. It's clean, in his mind. Justified."

"And yet he still hasn't killed any of us," Senku said coolly.

"Because he doesn't need to. Not yet. It's called *constraint theory*. He's in control, so he *acts* measured. But remove the constraints? Push him far enough?" Gen tilted his head, studying Senku out of the corner of his eye. "I'm not sure what you're betting on—Tsukasa's logic or your ability to stay one step ahead of it."

Senku let out a slow exhale, then finally turned his head, just a fraction. "I'm betting on the predictability of a controlled system. He acts like he's working off instinct, but every move he's made has followed a logical pattern. That's exploitable."

"Until it isn't," Gen murmured. "You're applying pure scientific reasoning to a behavioral model built on ideology. You do realize that, right?"

"I'm applying entropy," Senku shot back. "Unstable systems reveal their flaws fastest under stress. The sooner he escalates, the sooner we isolate the point of failure."

Gen's lips curved. Not a smirk—something more intrigued. "So you're using him like a live hypothesis."

Senku shrugged. “I’ve tested more dangerous variables.”

A pause.

Then Gen’s voice dropped, just a touch more serious. “You know, I’m impressed. Most people would play defense. You’re actively provoking evolution in a threat vector.”

Senku glanced at him, just for a second. “You’re not most people.”

Gen smiled, eyes sharp. “Neither are you, scientist.”

The silence that settled between them was heavier than it had any right to be. Full of equations and psychology models and unspoken recognition. Senku looked back to the screen, fingers tapping once against his leg.

Ten billion percent dangerous. And ten billion percent fascinating. Damned Mentalist.

> *What a way to wake up to the Stone World,* Senku thought ruefully, eyes flicking toward Yuzuriha.
>
> Across from him, she lowered her gaze slightly, the weight of Tsukasa’s words still echoing in her chest.
>
> *I get it now,* Yuzuriha thought, tension curling at the edges of her thoughts. *This is why Senku wanted us to run. He knew what kind of danger we were walking into.*

There was a moment of silence after the screen played out their thoughts.

Yuzuriha’s quiet realization. Senku’s rueful reflection.

The air around the group seemed to still.

“That’s… kinda brutal,” Chrome whispered, eyes wide. He leaned forward without realizing it, voice hushed like raising it might somehow make things worse. “She didn’t even get a full minute to breathe before getting threatened.”

A moment passed before Francois answered, voice calm but edged with quiet gravity. “A jarring reintroduction to life, to say the least.” Their fingers laced neatly in their lap, but their eyes stayed on the screen. “One must wonder what psychological toll that takes—waking into danger. No reprieve. No orientation.”

From the edge of the group, Ukyo’s gaze sharpened, arms folded tightly across his chest. “Senku knew.” His voice was quiet, but sure. “That’s why he offered them the option to run. It wasn’t just strategy or showmanship. He was trying to protect them. To give them a real choice before Tsukasa took that away."

“He always is,” Yuzuriha murmured, hugging her knees slightly. She wasn’t crying, but her voice had gone soft. “I didn’t realize how much he’d already planned for back then.”

Taiju rubbed the back of his neck, a sheepish edge in his voice. “Yeah… I think I get it now. I was so focused on fighting beside him, I didn’t think about how much danger he was trying to keep us away from.”

Gen’s eyes flicked to Senku. He didn’t say anything, but his gaze lingered—watching the subtle shift in Senku’s posture, the way his arms folded tighter, jaw set firmer than before. Senku finally spoke, voice dry but low. “It was the most efficient move. Letting her get threatened like that… wasn’t ideal. But we needed her back. For everything that came next.”

“And for you,” Gen added, tone light but not teasing. “You missed her too.”

Senku didn’t answer that.

Taiju and Yuzuriha knew, and that was enough for him.

Taiju slumped over without warning, stiff as a board. Senku's eyes widened, immediately dropping to check on him. That kick hadn't even landed on Taiju's head—but Tsukasa was no joke. The sheer impact had eventually knocked the big oaf out cold. Still… Senku's fingers brushed against his friend's pulse point. Strong. Steady. No sign of head trauma. Just pure system overload. With Taiju's absurd stamina, he'd be fine. Probably.

"Seems like he really did take that one full force," Senku muttered, straightening up. "He'll need a couple days to sleep it off."

It was hard not to grin. Unexpected? Sure. But useful. This played perfectly into Plan B, Route 5. He cracked his neck, one hand drifting up to his shoulder deliberately—drawing Tsukasa's attention, just like he needed.

Time to sell the next move.

Yuzuriha's hands were clenched tightly in her lap, her eyes locked on the screen like she could will Taiju to move. Kohaku leaned forward slightly, body tensed like she was preparing to leap into a fight that had happened years ago. Even Ryusui wasn't smiling now, his arms crossed as he analyzed every inch of Tsukasa's stance.

Ukyo's gaze flicked sideways toward Senku, measuring. "That wasn't a knockout blow to the head. More like system overload."

"Still," Chrome said, breath shallow, "He just dropped. Like a log. That guy is *so* strong—Tsukasa, I mean. He didn't even hit him that hard and he still—" Chrome cut himself off, brows furrowing.

"More importantly, I see someone doing something interesting," Gen murmured, one purple sleeve tucked near his mouth as his eyes stayed pinned on the screen. "Watch Senku. He's directing attention. But why the neck?"

Francois considered it. "To draw the eye?"

“Or distract from something else?” Ukyo added.

Gen tilted his head slowly, gears turning. “No, no—think like a mentalist. If you repeat a motion just enough, not too much to raise alarm, but *just enough* to be noticed subconsciously… it becomes an anchor. A focal point.” He leaned back, tapping his lips. “He’s not reacting to tension—he’s creating it.”

Chrome blinked. “So… he’s *pretending* to be nervous?”

“Not quite, He’s… *inviting interpretation*. Hm. If I were watching him from across a battlefield, I’d say… *that’s where I’d strike,"* He snapped his fingers, sudden understanding lighting his expression. “Ohhh, Senku-chan. You little manipulative gremlin. You’re signaling *him*. The only thing I don't understand is why yet.”

Senku didn’t look over. But his smirk twitched, just barely.

“I’m circling it, aren’t I?” Gen asked again, voice lilting, amused.

Senku huffed. “You’re circling like a mosquito.”

“Oho~ but I’m the kind that lands eventually,” Gen shot back, grin sharp and smug.

Ryusui barked a laugh. “You’re telling me this plan involves *tricking Tsukasa’s subconscious into hitting the wrong area*? You’re both out of your damn minds.”

"Yeah, so, let’s not fight each other," Tsukasa said, adjusting his cloak casually over one shoulder. "Just protect your girlfriend and stop worrying about some random statues."

Senku’s eye twitched.

The *boyfriend* in question was currently passed out face-first on the ground, thank you very much.

He planted a fist on his hip, watching as Tsukasa turned his back and walked away—calm, composed, as if none of this had even been a fight. Frankly, Senku wasn't sure why the man was *letting* them off the hook. But he had predicted the possibility—calculated for it—and so he didn't question it out loud. Not now.

Still, it told him something important.

Tsukasa wasn't entirely cold and calculated. There was something human in the way he spared Taiju and Yuzuriha. Likely because, from a tactical standpoint, they weren't threats to his plan. No need to eliminate pawns that wouldn't move against you.

Senku could get behind that kind of logic. He'd take the breathing room wherever he could get it.

The problem?

He was a threat to Tsukasa's plan.

And no matter how rational Tsukasa tried to be—no matter how much he might *not want* to cross that line—Senku knew exactly how this story ended.

Tsukasa would come back.

And next time… he'd come to kill him.

A low whistle broke the quiet.

"That plan of yours," Gen murmured, arms loosely folded as he leaned back with a thoughtful look. "Gotta admit—it worked."

Senku didn't turn, but one brow lifted—acknowledgment enough.

Gen continued, voice softer now, like they'd already run this thread once and were digging just a little deeper this time. "Still... for someone who prides himself on precision, that was a hell of a gamble. You treated Tsukasa like a variable you could plot on a chart. Like he was just another chemical reaction."

Senku gave a small shrug. "The reaction behaved as predicted."

“Oh, sure. But barely.” Gen tilted his head, sharp eyes flicking toward the screen. “You were doing math while he was composing an entire emotional opera. You caught the patterns, sure—the logic, the framework—” he tapped his temple, “but you almost missed the shifts. That change in his tone. His jaw. The silence before he turned away. That was one blink away from disaster.”

This time, Senku did glance at him, expression unreadable. If not for the knowing glint in his eyes, “And you would’ve caught that in time?”

Gen’s look was almost smug. “Ten billion percent.”

Senku snorted under his breath, arms folding across his chest as he leaned back like a man who’d just set down a heavy bag. “Perfect. I mean, you already know all the soft science crap’s yours, Mentalist. I’ll stick to the atomic scale.”

That earned him a quiet chuckle.

“No argument?” Gen asked, one brow raised in playful challenge.

“Why would I argue with facts?” Senku’s tone was dry, but not dismissive. “You’re better at it. I don’t waste energy pretending I’m not outclassed.”

There was a flicker of something more serious in his gaze now, just for a moment.

“But,” he added, voice quiet, “Watching you analyze him in real time? That would be pretty damn impressive. I hope That these reactions show us that first impression.”

Gen’s grin widened, not quite wolfish this time—something warmer beneath the surface. “Careful, Senku-chan. Say things like that too often, and I’ll start thinking you actually like having me around.”

Senku almost deflected, almost made a sarcastic quip—but felt his throat tighten instead. He rolled his eyes instead, casual and clean. Best not to open that door. Not right now.

Francois, ever composed, chimed in smoothly, “It’s reassuring to see such clearly defined roles within your team. Efficiency and harmony both benefit.”

Senku nodded, already moving on. “Exactly. Gen handles the human side of things.”

“And you handle… explosives?” Chrome muttered warily.

Senku grinned. “Division of labor.”

> “That arrow was moving at over 200 kilometers per hour,” Senku muttered once Tsukasa was safely out of earshot, tone cool but edged with just a bit of awe.
>
> Yuzuriha gasped in protest as Senku immediately turned and *started kicking Taiju in the waist* with zero ceremony.
>
> “Hey—! Senku!”
>
> But Senku’s grin was already creeping up, sharp and familiar as he leaned into the motion, lips curling with something downright devious.
>
> “Nap time’s over, big oaf!” he barked. *Kick.* “Rise and shine!” *Kick.* “Get the hell up already! Don’t make me bury you with the remains of our broken pots.” *Kick.* “Come on! You seriously gonna tap out from one hit?”

A sharp whistle cut through the group, low and half-laughing. Ryusui looked halfway between impressed and entertained, like he couldn’t decide whether to applaud or be mildly horrified. “You sure know how to motivate a man, Senku.”

The screen’s glow danced across Francois’s calm expression. They didn’t blink. “Not the approach I would have chosen,” They murmured, hands folded neatly, “But evidently… it gets results.”

Ukyo gave a soft, almost disbelieving laugh. “I mean… I knew you two were close, but that’s one way to show concern.”

Chrome squinted at the screen, confused. “Wait, is this *normal* for you guys? That’s how you wake people up?”

Gen finally broke the silence with a dramatic sigh, arms crossing like he was preparing for a performance. “The real mystery here is how Taiju’s just… fine with it. That’s the part I’ll never understand.” *Then again, it's not like he treats the rest of us much different,* Gen thought to himself, a shiver of manual labour dread going up his spine.

“Huh?” Taiju blinked, looking genuinely confused. “Why wouldn’t I be? That’s just how Senku is. It doesn’t mean anything bad.”

Yuzuriha smiled fondly. “He’s always been like that. Rough around the edges, but he cares in his own weird way.”

Senku, still watching the playback, huffed. “If I *really* didn’t care, I would’ve let him nap. Permanently.”

That earned a flick of Gen’s eyes and a snort. “Mmm, yes. Nothing says ‘I treasure your existence’ like whiplash and full-volume shouting. Truly heartwarming.”

“Big oaf can take it,” Senku replied, and this time, the dry tone didn’t quite hide the undercurrent of warmth. It lingered at the edges, unspoken but understood.

Chrome scratched at the side of his head. “So friendship in the modern world just… includes getting beat up sometimes?”

"Nope, that's definitely just them!" Yuzuriha rushed to explain, waving her hands a little in front of her face.

"No way! Not me!" Taiju's eyes snapped open without hesitation. That big oaf really *was* the best.

Yuzuriha's eyes widened in relief. "Are you actually okay? Thank goodness!"

"I'm made of tougher stuff than that!" Taiju declared, already pushing himself upright. "Still full of energy!"

Senku snorted. Of course he was. Some things never changed.

It was entirely predictable when the oaf immediately tried to charge off after their would-be murderer. Senku moved fast, grabbing the belt cinched around Taiju's waist in an effort to hold him back. But this was Taiju—they might as well have tried to stop a charging rhino with a shoelace.

Senku gritted his teeth as he was half-dragged forward. "Seriously?!"

With a sigh of mild exasperation, he let go of the overly stretchy material they'd engineered—just in time for it to snap back and slap Taiju squarely in the back with all the force he'd been pulling with.

The recoil smacked hard enough to stop even *Taiju* in his tracks.

All actions have an equal and opposite reaction, after all.

Taiju laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. "Haha… okay, yeah, I guess that *did* look kind of dumb, huh?"

"Oh, *kind of*?" Gen drawled, raising a brow. "You tried to solo-charge a murder machine while dragging Senku behind you like a ragdoll. Honestly, it was *gripping* television." He covered his mouth lightly with a finger, glancing at Senku. "Though I have to admit, I didn't expect the old Newtonian slapback method. Very classic. Very *you*."

Senku smirked from his seat. "Worked, didn't it?"

"That was so bad! In the good way!" Chrome was practically bouncing where he sat, hands flailing for emphasis. "You used the stretchy material against him—like, weaponized physics in real time! That's genius, Senku! How does it work?"

Senku leaned back with his arms crossed, a glint of mischief in his eye. “Tension recoil,” he said, the grin spreading slowly—*dangerously*. “Rubber’s a beautiful little polymer. When you stretch it, it stores up all that potential energy like a slingshot just waiting to snap.”

Chrome leaned in, already sparkling with curiosity.

“And then,” Senku continued, voice dropping to something just short of gleeful, “when you factor in velocity, angle of contact, surface resistance—you don’t just get a bounce back. You get a *whip*. Enough force concentrated on a single axis and bam—”

He snapped his fingers for dramatic effect.

“—if you’re lucky, it just knocks the wind outta you. If you’re not…” He gave a low chuckle. “Fractures. Bruising. Maybe a dislocated jaw if it hits right. You know. Fun stuff. Just depends on how much force you can apply.”

Chrome’s jaw dropped. “That’s *bad*! In the good way!”

Senku shot him a wicked grin. “Damn right.”

“Did you see his *face*?” Ryusui laughed, dramatically pantomiming the recoil with arms flailing. “Taiju took it like a cannonball to the spine and still looked *confused*.”

Francois gave a polite nod. “It was a remarkably efficient way to halt someone of Taiju’s… momentum. Improvised, yet precise. Very fitting for Master Senku.”

> “Dumbass, don’t you get what we just learned? We’re not stopping him with brute force!” Senku snapped.
>
> Frankly, their options were slim. To take down someone like Tsukasa, they’d need either a fighter just as strong who was actually *willing* to fight, or a weapon of science powerful enough to make up the difference. The seco option didn’t exist. But pretending

it did? Selling the illusion of a concrete plan? That was part of the strategy. If they could end it at the mere *threat* of such a weapon, perfect. If not—well, Senku had the real plan tucked away, ready to activate.

None of it involved Taiju running off like a bull with no aim.

"In this Stone World, there's only *one* path to defeating a monster like that," Senku declared, yanking the 200-kilometer-per-hour arrow out of the ground with a sharp motion. "Advancing civilization—and crafting weapons of science!"

This was it.

Crunch time.

And the thrill of it sparked under his skin like fire in a wire.

It was going to be exhilarating.

Playback resumes in ten minutes

"I swear, every time I think Senku's about to rein it in…" Kohaku crossed her arms, eyebrows raised—but the corner of her mouth twitched into a grin. "He just doubles down."

Ukyo, more subdued, rested a hand near his chin. "It's calculated. He knew exactly what to say, and when to say it. A clean escalation tactic—but… there's risk in that kind of boldness."

Yuzuriha sat quiet for a moment, fingers clasped in her lap, her expression caught somewhere between admiration and worry. "He's not pretending this won't be dangerous… but he's still pushing forward. That's so… Senku. That's how he always approached science too."

"Senku-chan certainly knows how to make a scene," Gen murmured, voice low and teasing—but something more thoughtful lingered underneath. His gaze lingered on the screen, then shifted toward the real Senku beside him. "You really enjoy this part, don't you? The performance of it all."

Senku smirked faintly, arms crossed. "It's not about enjoying it, Mentalist. It's about selling it. If the enemy thinks I'm confident enough to build a weapon, they have to think twice.

Delay buys time. Time builds options. Which you of all people already know, so where are you going with this?"

Gen let out a soft, theatrical sigh. “Of course, of course. Pure strategy. Nothing more.” His eyes glinted, though the tilt of his smile was more wistful than mocking. “Still… you don’t pull out that kind of flair as often anymore. These days, you just let me take the stage.”

Senku didn’t look at him, but the smirk twitched a notch higher. So that was where this was going, “Why waste energy doing something you’re already better at?”

Gen rolled his eyes, though the curl of his mouth gave him away. “That’s a lazy excuse. Admit it—you miss the spotlight. At least a little. Maybe you could take it back every once in awhile.”

Trying to worm his way out of even his mentalist job? Ten billion percent not happening.

Gen didn’t expect a real answer. But Senku’s shrug was casual, his tone dry, maybe a little too fast, not thought out, “Maybe. When the audience is worth it.”

Judging by the wide eyes the scientist gave, seemed that Gen was spot on with that observation.

Senku swallowed. No wonder these things kept slipping out—lines he could barely pretend *weren’t* flirtatious. No matter how often he reminded himself not to go there, the words kept rising to the surface. It didn’t help that Gen had a habit of steering things that direction—nudging them closer to a line Senku didn’t want to cross. Then again… maybe *thinking* that was already giving the mentalist too much credit.

Still.

I’m totally screwed.

And judging by the glint in Gen’s eyes—that sharp, knowing light that always flickered there when he was five moves ahead—Senku could tell he wasn’t imagining things.

Senku forced his gaze back to the screen, jaw tight.

If he was going to keep playing it safe, he’d have to stop looking.

Chapter End Notes

Playing into Senku not being able to help himself but flirt with Gen at this point, poor guy. I wonder just how slow I can make this burn. I recently read a Omniscient Reader's Viewpoint reaction fic which is like, over 800k of slowburn, I was gagged. Perhaps that is the torture I should mimic here. Just endless flirting and Senku being like 'oh no I can't' .... Just kidding, I wouldn't do that.

Would I?

Chapter 12: Interlude Three - Ebola Arc Part One

Chapter Notes

> This isn't what I wanted. I WANTED to do Ebola Arc in just one chapter, but lets just blame Ao3 on the fact that you are now getting wait time on this. It's finished, but when I went to do the final look over and publish, I couldn't. So now you get part 1 now and the next part in a few days.
>
> I want to say that I really want Yuzuriha to be a fucking CHARACTER because she is so adorable so you'll see me adding things to her in these reactions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Senku felt like he was spiraling.

Being around the Mentalist—having someone constantly looking into his mind, pulling apart every glance, every motive, every stray thought—it was flustering in a way he couldn't explain. Unsettling. Like his mental walls had been stripped bare and left exposed to everyone around him.

It messed with his control. That alone had been making him irritable for hours. Every time Gen leaned a little too close, or threw one of those knowing looks his way, or tilted his voice just enough to make something sound like a flirtation—Senku felt his grip slip again. If he were the betting type, he'd wager that was exactly why he kept reacting. Why he kept *saying* things. *Looking* at him. *Flirting* with him.

Despite very, *very* clearly not wanting to.

And the worst part? He couldn't even fix it. Couldn't shut it down or isolate himself like he normally would. Everyone *wanted* to watch this. His future self wanted them to see this. There was no avoiding it. No slipping away.

The playback started again.

And Senku stayed still, jaw tight, bracing for the next flicker of emotion he wouldn't be able to stop.

> The chemical smell of old copper wiring and half-finished polymers lingered in the high school lab, though the windows were wide open and the spring breeze rolled in with every sigh of the wind. Senku sat alone at the back counter, legs crossed, goggles perched lazily on his forehead as he idly stirred a beaker of something that hissed a little too enthusiastically. He didn't even look up when it bubbled over. Just slid the burner away with a pencil, eyes still locked on the textbook cracked open beside him.

Things went from bad to worse far too easily. Senku noted it numbly, jaw tight. When he'd deflected earlier with, *if it's important, the TV will show it*—referring to Luis—he hadn't expected the damn screen to take him up on it. But here they were. The memory was just as sharp as the day it happened. This was before he started applying to internships. Before the fieldwork. Before Africa. Before he met *them*.

If he thought his emotional control had been shaky before, this wasn't going to help.

Kohaku's eyes widened. "What… is that place?"

Chrome leaned so far forward he nearly tipped off his seat. "Wait—is that the old world? Again? Why are we seeing it now?"

"It looks like our high school science lab," Yuzuriha said quietly, scanning the screen. "Everything's so precise. The tables, the lighting… I forgot how bright it used to be."

"Guys," Gen said lightly, though his smile didn't quite reach his eyes, "You're all missing something obvious."

He nodded toward the corner of the screen.

They looked.

And there he was.

A younger Senku—maybe fifteen, maybe sixteen—perched on a lab stool, goggles pushed up on his forehead. He stirred a beaker filled with something hissing and volatile. A burner clicked off-frame, nudged with casual precision by a pencil he didn't even glance at.

He let out a breath through his nose, leaned back against the seat, and forced a smirk. "Huh. Guess we really are digging deep." *What was the logic behind sending this back? It's not as ethically questionable as the revival test on that fragmented statue… but this? Personal history? Subjective context? Not my style. I wouldn't have included it unless there was strategic reasoning. Which tells me again—someone else is involved.*

Yuzuriha looked over, her expression soft. "That's… you. From before again."

Ryusui tilted his head, his usual cocky smile tempered with something more thoughtful. "You looked even more like a smug little scientist back then. Must've been in your prime."

"Still am," Senku replied automatically, but the sarcasm lacked its usual bite.

Taiju hadn't said anything, still staring wide-eyed at the lab on the screen. "Man… I haven't seen our high school like that in years…"

"Some of us have never seen it at all," Chrome muttered, eyes glued to the fluorescent lights and perfectly smooth walls. "Everything's so straight. How did they *make* all that? When we first saw it everything went by so quickly but..."

Not that he needed the textbook.

It was university-level organic chemistry, and he'd memorized the entire thing three weeks ago.

The pages were dog-eared more from habit than necessity now. Half the book's margins were filled with corrections. The other half with experiments he'd deemed more interesting.

"Boring," he muttered to himself, letting the test tube clink gently against the rack. "At this point, they should start paying me to write these things."

Ryusui let out a laugh that practically echoed. "Ha! There it is—our little prodigy. A science genius at any age. Senku, just say the word when you're ready to start publishing. I'll fund the whole operation for a modest return, of course."

Senku rolled his eyes. "Of course you would, dirty capitalist."

Yuzuriha leaned forward slightly, her eyes swimming as she recalled all the evenings she used to sit with him, flashcards in hand, her voice going hoarse from hours of questions. "It's definitely graduate-level work," she said softly. "He used to have me come by his house and quiz him on it for hours. I don't remember much—just that it was way above anything we did in class. A lot of big words stuck out, like *stoichiometry, chirality, retrosynthesis, polymerase chain reaction, thermogravimetric analysis, crystallography, isomerization, quantum tunneling, molar enthalpy,* and... something with spin states?"

She laughed a little, shaking her head. "I didn't understand a word of it, but he always said just hearing it out loud helped."

Taiju nodded with full-bodied sincerity. "It's true! I couldn't even pronounce half the words, but Senku just rattled it off like he was explaining how to fry an egg."

Francois folded their arms, tone precise. "So this was his baseline before the fall. In that case, one might argue the world needed to collapse just to give it a chance to catch up."

"Ohhh, I love that," Gen murmured with a grin, tapping a finger to his temple. "The entire planet forced into a hard reset just to give one smug little scientist some proper competition. Deliciously ironic."

Senku snorted. That idea was so ridiculous it didn't deserve one millimeter of attention.

Kohaku narrowed her eyes at the screen. “Whatever he’s reading—he’s not just reading it. He’s fixing it.” Her arms crossed. “The edges of that book—those aren’t random marks. That’s his writing. He was correcting the thing.”

“You rewrote the whole thing?” Chrome asked, awestruck.

“Because it was wrong,” Senku said simply, like it wasn’t remotely a big deal.

Ryusui leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, smirking. “So tell me, Senku—what do you call it when someone rewrites grad-level theory at fifteen?”

“I call it Tuesday,” Senku muttered dryly.

That got a burst of laughter from the crew—even Ukyo gave the faintest upward twitch at the corners of his mouth.

But Gen, ever observant, didn’t laugh right away. He was watching the younger version of Senku—sharp-eyed, motion restless, still tapping a test tube like his thoughts were sprinting miles ahead of whatever the world expected from him. It was like watching a brain trapped in a body two sizes too small, “He really was trapped in his own brilliance, huh?” he murmured, mostly to himself.

The school bell rang somewhere in the distance, but Senku didn’t even twitch. He wasn’t technically supposed to be in here anymore—his lab periods had ended over an hour ago—but the teachers had long since stopped trying to kick him out. What was the point? He wasn’t hurting anyone. And it was either this or let the kid break into the university’s research facility again.

Again.

Senku let out a long sigh, tapping his pen rapidly against the desk. He’d already built a fully functional voltaic battery out of scrap metal last week. Ran a turbine system using

rain gutters the week before that. His most recent project—refining ethanol in controlled conditions—had been deemed *questionable for a high school setting* by the faculty, even though Senku had correctly argued that fermentation was used in making soy sauce and thus culturally relevant.

He was starting to itch.

Not physically, but in that maddening way his brain sometimes did when it didn't have enough stimulus. Like a motor spinning with nowhere to go.

He looked down at the numbers he'd scribbled on the side of his notebook—calculations on orbital decay and satellite maintenance. Not because he was building one. Just because he could.

"Ughhh," He groaned aloud, dragging his hands down his face. "This is ten billion percent pointless."

Kohaku leaned forward, her sharp eyes locked on the screen. "He looks like a lion trapped in a too-small cage."

"More like a rocket strapped to a tether," Ryusui added with a lazy grin. "That kind of mind with nowhere to run? Of course he went nuclear the second he got freedom."

Yuzuriha's voice was quiet, laced with something like regret. "I didn't realize how… stifling it was for him. Back then, I thought he was just intense. Focused. But watching this… he was suffocating."

"This is ten billion percent pointless." Senku rolled his eyes. At the start of this whole thing he really thought he wouldn't care as much as he currently was, but the way that they just continued to poke at his mental state was stioll putting him on edge. He almost couldn't wait for the focus to shift to other members of the Kingdom of science, because this was getting to be too much.

Francois gave a soft hum, folding their hands. "Cognitive stagnation. A well-documented psychological state, particularly common in individuals with asynchronous intellectual development."

Taiju blinked. "Wait—so he was sick from being *too smart*?"

Gen's tone was mild, but his eyes stayed fixed on the screen. "Emotionally, yes. Senku's brain wasn't designed to idle. That itch he keeps describing? That's textbook intellectual deprivation. If a person's mind can't find stimulation, it turns inward. Restlessness, irritability, sleep disturbance… it all tracks." He tapped a finger to his temple. "The academic term would be *acute cognitive isolation.* It's rare. Most people don't think fast enough to notice when their environment can't keep up."

Senku made a noise of protest from beside him. "Let's not turn this into some tragic analysis. I wasn't on the verge of some emotional breakdown. I was just bored. That's all."

Kohaku didn't look convinced. "Bored enough to start calculating orbital decay for fun?"

"Better than drooling on some teacher's review sheet," Senku muttered. "At least orbital mechanics has real-world applications."

Ukyo didn't look away from the screen. "Still… you looked miserable."

Senku shifted, scoffing under his breath like the whole conversation was starting to wear thin. "Tch. You try living in a world where no one speaks your language and see how long you last."

Chrome blinked. "You mean… science?"

Senku turned, throwing up his arms in mock exasperation. "Obviously science! Ten billion percent yes, science! What other language is elegant enough to solve *everything* from starvation to planetary colonization?!"

His grin was sharp-edged, almost theatrical—but those who knew him best could hear the crackle of strain under the bravado.

Gen's brow lifted, catching the note of fatigue. But he said nothing—just watched, amused and quietly concerned, as Senku leaned back like the conversation bored him.

Ukyo's gaze sharpened.

It was subtle—so subtle that most of the group wouldn't have caught it. But Senku's voice, usually razor-steady when he played up his energy, had hitched for just a second. Barely audible. But there. A crack beneath the polish. Ukyo didn't look away from the screen, but his thoughts lingered on the scientist sat close to him.

Senku wasn't the type to let emotion slip by accident. Next to Gen, he probably had the tightest grip on himself out of everyone here. Logic always took precedence. Strategy first, vulnerability last. So what was different now? Ukyo folded his arms. He didn't voice the question—not yet. But something had shaken Senku deeper than he wanted to admit. And if that control was slipping, even just a little, then whatever they were about to see…

There was a pause, just long enough for the weight of that to land.

Then, almost as if to deflect, he muttered under his breath, "If the school had upgraded their chromatography stations like I told them, I wouldn't have been nearly as restless."

Gen gave a dry little laugh. "Oh, absolutely. I'm sure it was the equipment's fault." But his gaze lingered, sharp and knowing.

Senku didn't answer right away. Just stared at the screen where his younger self spun slowly on a lab stool, dead-eyed and brilliant and completely adrift.

Senku didn't even look up as the door to the lab slammed open.

"Senkuu!" Taiju's voice boomed through the room like a friendly sledgehammer.

Senku grunted without turning. "If you're here to say something dumb, don't."

The real Taiju, watching from the couch, blinked. “Was I really that loud?”

“ *Yes,* ” half the group answered in unison.

Kohaku chuckled, folding her arms. “At least you were consistent.”

“Friendly sledgehammer,” Ryusui said approvingly. “Very on-brand.”

> “Too late,” Yuzuriha said cheerfully, slipping in behind Taiju with a more graceful presence. She was carrying two canned drinks from the vending machine and set one down beside Senku with practiced care. Her cheer only seemed to grow as she laid eyes on her other friend. Senku snorted lightly, it was always funny when Yuzuriha got in the mood to tease the big oaf as well, though it was exceptionally rare.
>
> “I’m not saying anything dumb!” Taiju insisted, puffing up his chest. “I’m here to check in on our genius, that’s all.”
>
> “You checked in yesterday,” Senku replied dryly, glancing back to the notebook in front of him, where pages of calculations looked more like alien language than high school notes.

Yuzuriha’s voice echoed from the screen—light, teasing, almost musical in its casual ease.

Kohaku blinked, head tilting. “She sounds… different.”

“More playful,” Ukyo added quietly. “Less guarded than she is now.”

The real Yuzuriha flushed slightly under their attention, fingers folding in her lap. “I guess I was. It was a comfortable time. I wasn’t worried about anything back then. I wasn’t trying to protect anyone or hold things together. I could just… exist. After the petrification, I stopped thinking about how I came across. There wasn’t time for that. I just focused on helping.”

Senku glanced her way, silent but knowing. Yuzuriha returned a small smile, a little sad, but solid. “But I’m still me. Just… a version that learned to stop wasting time.”

There was a pause, until—

“You’re even more amazing now,” Taiju said suddenly, voice loud in the quiet.

Everyone turned.

His face went bright red. “I-I mean, you were already amazing before! I just—now you’re like—strong and cool and you’ve always been smart and—!”

He gave up mid-flail and turned away, ears practically glowing. “Forget I said anything! Gahhh!!”

Kohaku smirked.

Gen cupped his mouth with his sleeve, whispering to Senku, in that mocking way of using Senku's own terminology, “Ten billion percent progress.”

Senku huffed. “Don’t you start.”

Gen hummed, more thoughtful than amused. *Still... What sticks out to me... Daily check-ins? Not necessary for him. Of course not. One moment of shared understanding a week probably felt like enough to someone like Senku—someone who’s always been ten steps ahead of needing people.* Gen’s expression softened, only slightly. *But that doesn’t mean he didn’t notice who showed up.*

He kept that thought to himself.

Senku sat in silence for a moment longer. He was watching himself now with narrowed eyes—not amused, not fond. Just… reflective. His gaze tracked the version of himself onscreen like it was a specimen under glass. At least it wasn't *that* experiment. Or the one after that. There was that one time he caught an old man watching through the window and—well, in hindsight, *maybe* amping up the explosion levels just to see if he could induce cardiac distress hadn't been the most ethical use of chemistry. Then there was the algae methane incident… and the accelerated bacteria trial where he *probably* should've worn a respirator. (He learned his lesson, of course, the next time he messed with bacteria he boiled it before any sort of study.) But hey. All in the name of progress.

He exhaled slowly, tilting his head. "Could've been worse," he muttered under his breath. "At least I wasn't setting off thermite this time."

Taiju blinked. "Wait, *thermite*?"

Chrome sat bolt upright. "OH, we are *definitely* circling back to that! What is thermite?! Can we make it?! Is it dangerous?!"

"It's ten billion percent dangerous," Senku replied without missing a beat. "Burns through steel like wet paper. Beautiful stuff. I was testing structural resistance."

Francois didn't flinch. "At what age?"

"…Ten"

Ryusui barked a laugh. "You're telling me you were trying to melt industrial-grade steel before you could drive?"

"I still can't drive," Senku said dryly. *Motorbikes, sure—but that was just for field tests in Africa. No license, obviously.*

Kohaku grinned, elbow propped on her knee. “Now *that’s* the Senku I know. Less hesitation, more explosions.”

Yuzuriha peered over his shoulder, eyebrows lifting. “Senku… This isn’t high school curriculum, is it? More grad level stuff?”

Senku clicked his tongue, flipping a page. “I burned through that garbage last year. This is doctoral-level particle physics cross-referenced with a new material synthesis model I’ve been tweaking. The math’s still a little dirty.”

Taiju blinked. “...Is it, uh. Fun?”

“Not anymore,” Senku muttered. “I already solved it. Now I’m just checking for flaws. Like debugging a program you’ve already finished coding. Pointless, but necessary. And boring.”

Kohaku squinted slightly. “Wait… he said ‘doctoral.’ So… medicine?”

Chrome leaned in beside her. “No, no, I think it’s like… science royalty or something. It *sounds* fancy.”

Francois, calm as ever, folded their hands behind their back. “A doctoral degree—commonly referred to as a PhD—is a title granted for research excellence. It isn’t exclusive to medicine. One can earn a doctorate in mathematics, physics, literature, psychology…”

“Ohhh,” Chrome said slowly, his eyes wide. “So it’s like being the top-tier chief of brains?”

“In essence,” Francois agreed. “It is the highest level of academic certification.”

Senku remained quiet, arms loosely crossed—but his gaze flicked to Gen for just a second too long. A PhD. He’d known that already, technically, but something about hearing it again made it land harder this time. A certified doctorate in psychology. Senku didn’t really believe in titles for the sake of prestige, but… still. It meant something. It hadn't been something that he was in a rush to get himself, he already had obtained most of the knowledge so getting the title was a bit of a formality... Still, recognition of mastery. The Mentalist deserved that for

his papers, though not those books. Those were dumpster fire worthy if not for how helpful they were.

The Mentalist, of course, noticed his gaze.

He didn’t say anything right away—just tilted his head, one brow arched in mild amusement. Senku looked away before anything could be made of it, but Gen’s grin tugged higher all the same.

"This was pretty much normal for Senku back then. He’d go quiet for hours just thinking. Then suddenly be like, ‘Hey, Taiju, wanna help me build a satellite dish?’ Taiju mentioned, he looked proud of his position as a helper, when the most that he really did was bring the heavy stuff around.

Yuzuriha laughed, shaking her head. “And then complain when you didn’t know what a capacitor was.”

“Then why do it?” Yuzuriha asked gently.

Senku finally looked up. And that was all it took—one glance at his face to see that he was exhausted in the way only someone with too much brain and not enough stimulation could be. His mind was always running, but lately it had been going in circles. There was nothing left in the school system to challenge him. He was, quite literally, too smart to be here.

“Because there’s nothing better,” he said flatly. “I’ve already exhausted all the fun stuff. The moment I finish building that damn vacuum chamber, I’ll have recreated particle acceleration at a low scale for the third time. It’s just... the same thing again and again.”

Taiju scratched the back of his head, glancing to Yuzuriha. “So... maybe you need, like, *bigger* science.”

Senku snorted. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You know,” Taiju said, puffing up again like he’d just said something brilliant. “Like that NASA guy you’re always going on about. When you were learning more from him you seemed like you were having a lot of fun. Maybe you just need something like that again? Seems pretty simple to me!"

Senku hummed noncommittally, arms folded behind his head as he leaned back. “It wasn’t a real collider. Just a particle bouncer using magnetic repulsion in a vacuum loop.”

Chrome practically vibrated in place. “I don’t get most of that—except *vacuum,* because of the lightbulbs—but it sounds crazy powerful!”

Kohaku raised a brow. “And this ‘NASA’ I keep hearing about? Is that where the scientist was from? The one you mentioned—Xeno?”

Francois answered before Senku could. “NASA stood for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. It was a government agency in the United States, focused on space exploration and scientific advancement. One of the most advanced organizations of its time—responsible for landing humans on the Moon and pioneering countless innovations in engineering, physics, and planetary science.”

“I remember Xeno,” Yuzuriha said, her tone more thoughtful now. “You didn’t talk about him much, but… you always got serious when you did. I think I even saw some of his notes, back when I used to quiz you on orbital mechanics.”

Taiju nodded slowly, eyes narrowing with recollection. “He’s the guy you used to send rocket blueprints to, right? The one who actually replied? I didn’t get what you two were talking about, but I remember you saying he was ‘legit.’”

Senku gave a low exhale, expression unreadable. “Yeah. I sent out messages to hundreds of scientists when I was a kid. Xeno was the one who wrote back. At first, I thought he was just humoring me. But then he started sending equations, tests, even corrections. It was a full-on correspondence.”

Ryusui whistled, impressed. “So basically, little Senku hacked his way into a one-on-one mentorship with a NASA genius?”

“I didn’t hack anything,” Senku said flatly. “He responded because I had a few braincells to rub together and some of his colleges were lacking."

Gen raised an eyebrow. “And yet you’re dead set on never reviving him.”

“Ten billion percent.” Senku’s tone turned colder. “He’s not someone you wake lightly. The guy’s not just smart—he’s dangerous. He thinks science should be controlled, hoarded. That only those ‘qualified’ should decide humanity’s future. He ten billion percent would try and control everything. Textbook evil genius type.”

“That’s… terrifying,” Yuzuriha said softly.

Ukyo tapped his fingers together. “And he was willing to share knowledge with you when you were, what, thirteen?”

“Because I passed his standards,” Senku said flatly. “Which should tell you exactly how rigid those standards are.”

Taiju frowned. “But you respected him, didn’t you? I mean, I could tell back then.”

Senku hesitated. Just a blink.

“…I respected what his brain could do. When situations like this were just theoretical it was fine, but its not theoretical anymore."

Gen studied him carefully. “So if he came back now… we’d be looking at a new Tsukasa. One with equations instead of fists.”

“No,” Senku said, gaze sharp. “We’d be looking at something much worse.”

Senku blinked.

Yuzuriha tilted her head thoughtfully. “Actually, he might have a point. You’re always looking for more data, right? More input. So maybe it’s not a new project you need—it’s a new environment.”

Senku leaned back in his chair, eyes drifting up toward the ceiling.

New environment.

“Have you looked into any real research programs?” Yuzuriha continued, her voice thoughtful. “Like assistantships or internships? You’ve already published in journals. You could probably skip ahead if you really wanted.”

“I could help look,” Taiju offered quickly, thumping a fist to his chest. “I’m not smart, but I know how to search stuff online!”

Ryusui gave a low whistle, clearly entertained. “Now *that* was a clean follow-up. Yuzuriha, I like your style. Smart, practical—no wonder Taiju is hopelessly lost on you.”

The effect was immediate.

Taiju practically short-circuited. “Wha—I—I wasn’t—That’s not—! I was just helping! Like friends do! That’s all! I didn’t mean anything—I mean, I *meant* it! But not like—!”

His voice pitched up half an octave mid-sentence and kept climbing. By the third flail, he’d managed to knock over a stick someone had been whittling and was too flustered to notice.

Yuzuriha, meanwhile, had frozen like someone had hit the pause button. Her hands were folded tight in her lap, her face glowing red, and she was staring at the screen like if she blinked, the playback would turn into a distraction and save her. She looked like she was trying to will herself out of existence.

Chrome blinked, glancing between them with a bewildered frown. “Wait, what’s happening?”

Kohaku leaned closer, her voice just above a whisper. An evil glint in her eye as she watched Ryusui making progress on the pairing, “I think Ryusui struck a nerve.”

“I did?” Ryusui replied innocently, clasping a hand to his chest like a knight being accused of a crime. “Must’ve been an accident.”

It absolutely wasn’t.

> “That’s... painfully obvious,” Senku muttered, rubbing at the back of his neck. Maybe he should have thought about this himself.
>
> But the idea had rooted itself in his mind. Real fieldwork. Real stakes. The kind of science that didn’t just sit in a classroom—science that could change the world. Bigger science.
>
> And suddenly, the stale classroom air didn’t feel quite so heavy anymore.
>
> The sky was turning orange by the time Senku left the school. His ba0-ckpack hung loosely from one shoulder, light despite the weight of what he carried inside it—several notebooks, a multi-tool, two vacuum-sealed vials of cultured yeast, and a disassembled prototype of a DIY centrifuge made from a salad spinner. Nothing new. Nothing exciting. Just more of the same. He kicked a loose rock as he walked. It skittered ahead of him, then rolled off into a gutter.
>
> “Bigger science,” he muttered under his breath. “Tch. Dumb oaf actually said something useful for once.”

Taiju sat up straighter, like someone had just declared him valedictorian. “Wait. Wait—did Senku just admit I had a good idea?!”

“You did,” Yuzuriha said with a soft laugh, the last of her blush fading into a proud smile. “It really helped him.”

At least for a little while. But even as she said it, the memory of Senku after his return flickered at the edge of her mind—quiet, tired, not quite himself. It hadn’t erased the value of what they’d given him, but it reminded her just how deep that ache had run. They hadn’t

known everything back then, not really. Just that their friend had come back from something… heavy. Something he didn't talk about. She bit her lip, glancing sideways at Senku now. He looked normal enough—half-slouched, eyes on the screen, vaguely annoyed by everyone's noise—but Yuzuriha had known him long enough to see when he was hiding in plain sight. Was he really okay with all of this being shown? With them seeing how he'd struggled?

Taiju, blissfully unaware, beamed and puffed out his chest. "Ten billion points for me, then!"

"Oh dear," Francois murmured, folding their hands. "We may never hear the end of this."

Ryusui let out a booming laugh. "Ten billion, huh? I'll double it if you manage it twice."

"That's asking too much," Gen drawled, though his grin was genuine. "Let him bask. It's rare to see Taiju this smug and actually deserving."

Chrome blinked. "Wait, wait—are we all using the ten billion scale now? Because I've been working off a ten-point system like a chump!"

Across the room, Senku rolled his eyes—though there was a flicker of something more behind it. Fondness, maybe. A resigned sort of warmth. He didn't even remember when he'd started using that phrase, but hearing it bounce around now felt… weirdly right. Nostalgic.

The words clung to him. They looped in his head, repeating over and over in Taiju's earnest voice. He hadn't meant it seriously—probably didn't even know what he was saying. But Yuzuriha had followed it up with something even more dangerous:

Have you looked into any real research programs?

Senku sighed through his nose.

Because she was right.

He wasn't just bored—he was stagnating. He'd capped out everything he could do in this environment. Built every machine. Read every book. Run every simulation. And for

the first time in a long time, his brain was beginning to eat itself from the inside out. If he didn't find a new problem to solve soon, he'd go insane.

The streetlights were flickering on by the time he reached the house. His father wasn't home yet—probably working overtime at the space agency, knowing the old man. Senku unlocked the door, kicked off his shoes, and dropped his bag onto the floor of his workshop without ceremony. Then, right on cue, the front door clicked open again.

"Yo, I smell burnt solder. Must be Tuesday," Byakuya called out as he entered, carrying two bags of groceries in one arm.

Chrome leaned forward, blinking fast. "Wait, that's Senku's dad? The guy who helped create our village?"

Yuzuriha nodded, her voice soft. "Yeah. Byakuya Ishigami. He adopted Senku when he was little."

"He's the one who was on the International Space Station, right?" Ukyo added, piecing it together. "I remember hearing something like that on the news."

"*He smells burnt solder and assumes it's Tuesday,*" Gen quoted with a grin. "My god, the man's calibration to Senku's chaos is flawless."

Kohaku stared at the screen, brow furrowed. "He seems… kind. More casual than I expected. Not like Senku, not exactly. I thought they'd be more alike."

"Unshaken," Francois added. "The tone of someone who's seen his son attempt to launch a homemade rocket and came home with snacks anyway."

Taiju grinned. "That's just how Byakuya is. He's always been proud of Senku—never once tried to hold him back."

"Yeah," Yuzuriha agreed, quieter. "They're really close. Even if Senku never says it."

Senku didn’t say anything.

He was still.

Too still.

His arms weren’t crossed. His posture wasn’t defensive. Just… still. Watching the screen like it might vanish if he blinked too fast.

Seeing his dad like this—alive, casual, making offhand jokes and watching over him like always—was almost too much. Memory was one thing. His memory was perfect. He could recall Byakuya’s voice, the way he tilted his head when amused, the way he smiled without ever seeming smug. But this? This wasn’t memory. This was *presence.* Movement. Inflection. Breathing air again. He stared, long and hard. Committing it to memory all over again, even if he didn’t need to.

He felt Chrome shift closer, voice soft. “He’s part of my family line, huh? That’s… wild. And kinda awesome.”

Kohaku didn’t speak right away. She was watching Senku instead, eyes narrowed in thought. When she did speak, her voice was quiet but resolute. “If he’s the reason our village exists… then I owe him. All of us do.”

Senku’s throat tightened.

Senku glanced over his shoulder, sharp eyes looking at the semitranslucent bags, “You bought three types of beans again. For one person.”

“Hey, don’t underestimate the power of legumes.” Byakuya shut the door with his foot. “You’re home early.”

"Yeah. Nothing to do at school."

Byakuya wandered into the kitchen and started putting things away. "Let me guess. You dismantled the lab skeleton for fun again and the principal kicked you out."

"I needed a better joint model."

"Mhm."

There was a beat of silence, then Byakuya peeked back out from the kitchen, eyebrows raised, "You've got that look on your face again."

Senku turned back toward his workbench. "What look?"

"The *'my current reality is insufficient and I require a more stimulating existence'* look."

Senku made a face, that was enough to break his overly nostalgic mindset if nothing else, "Yeah. He knew I hated that combo. Still made it every time. I'm not doing what he was angling for. Stupid old man."

Ryusui raised an eyebrow, smirking. "Out of spite or devotion?"

"Both," Senku muttered. "He said it was a balanced protein source. I said it was a culinary abomination." *And he wanted me to break and let him order junk food against his diet. Cunning old man.*

Francois, who had been observing in polite silence, finally spoke—with no small amount of offense. "Three types of beans. No regard for balance, flavor profile, or even a hint of texture variety. That, I cannot forgive."

Ryusui barked a laugh. "A war crime, according to Francois."

"I've seen wartime rations plated with more consideration," she added flatly, eyes narrowing just a touch. "It's disgraceful. Even Senku deserved better."

Senku huffed through his nose, but it was closer to a laugh than a sigh. "Didn't even eat it. Just let him think I did."

Francois clicked her tongue, clearly unimpressed. “Tactful. But tragic nonetheless.”

Senku didn’t answer.

Byakuya chuckled, stepping into the hallway and leaning against the doorframe. “Alright, kiddo. What’s on your mind?”

Senku tapped a pen against the desk, expression unreadable.

“I think I need to go somewhere with a higher mortality rate.”

Chrome blinked, unsure if he’d misheard. *Did he just say…?*

Kohaku shot a look toward Senku, a crease forming between her brows. That hadn’t sounded like a joke. Not even close. Ukyo’s eyes narrowed slightly, his posture still but alert. That tone—quiet, offhanded, too dry to be teasing—was the kind of thing people didn’t say lightly. Gen didn’t speak. Just tilted his head a fraction, watching Senku closely like he was trying to read between the lines.

“Come on, you guys know how I meant it.” Senku picked at his ear, pretending nonchalance. His voice was casual, almost annoyed. Too casual. Even his old man hadn’t reacted like this. Only Ryusui seemed remotely normal, lounging with his usual ease. Everyone else had gone rigid. Well—except Gen. The Mentalist never tensed, never twitched. But Senku could *feel* his gaze tracing him like a scalpel, dissecting his tone, posture, breath. Calculating.

Yuzuriha froze, “Senku…” she whispered, startled—but her eyes softened quickly. It wasn’t shock so much as recognition.

Taiju’s jaw dropped. “He—he said that to his *dad*?” For a second he looked completely thrown… but then, slowly, he rubbed the back of his neck and let out a breathy laugh. “Okay, yeah. Yeah, that *does* sound like him. Still—man.”

Yuzuriha smiled faintly, setting her drink down. “He always did say the bluntest things when he was trying to avoid saying the real ones.”

Ryusui, for once, didn't laugh. He leaned forward slightly, one brow raised. "Now *that's* a line," he muttered, equal parts impressed and unsettled.

Francois' eyes remained fixed on the screen. Her voice, when it came, was quiet but certain. "Bold," she said. "But telling. There's no clearer sign of a person's core than the place they choose to be vulnerable."

Byakuya blinked.

"…That's not a sentence most parents want to hear from their kid."

Senku turned in his chair, resting his chin on his hand. "I'm not most kids."

"No," Byakuya agreed with a sigh—one that was more amused than exasperated. "You're really, *really* not."

He stepped into the room, leaned against the doorframe, arms folded. There was no alarm in his voice, only curiosity. And pride—so much pride it practically radiated off him, "Alright, genius. Talk me through it. What's going on in that massive brain of yours now?"

Chrome let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Whoa. He didn't even flinch…"

Kohaku's eyes were wide, her expression unreadable for a second before it softened. "He didn't jump to conclusions. Not even a little."

"That's how a real parent responds," Ukyo said quietly. "No fear, no assumptions—just trust."

Gen leaned back slightly, watching the screen with a faint, unreadable smile. "Mm~. That's why Senku doesn't have to explain himself much. Not to him, anyway." He laced his fingers under his chin. "His dad's one of the only people who never tried to slow him down. Just redirected the energy."

But in Gen's mind, the words kept going—quietly, clinically, affectionately.

That kind of parenting? That's rare. You don't get it from lectures or textbooks. It's instinct. It's patience. It's being able to recognize that your kid isn't "difficult"—he's wired different. Byakuya didn't panic when Senku said something wild. He didn't try to fix it or mold it. He let Senku be Senku—quirks, sharp edges, obsessive focus and all. That's not just parenting. That's unconditional accommodation disguised as casual banter. The kind of emotional scaffolding a kid like him needed to stay brilliant without burning out.

Ryusui let out a low whistle, his usual grin a little softer. "Ten billion points to Pops. That's what you call elite-level emotional intelligence."

> Senku shrugged. "I've run out of problems to solve. Everything here is too clean, too stable. Too safe. If I want to work on the kind of science that matters—the kind that *saves* people—I need to go where it's actually needed."
>
> Byakuya nodded slowly, lips twitching upward. "You're thinking about some sort of field research, something with diseases?"
>
> "Exactly."
>
> For a long moment, there was silence.
>
> Then Byakuya chuckled and ruffled Senku's hair as he walked past. "I always knew I'd have to send you off to space one day. Guess some other country a decent start."

Chrome leaned in closer to the screen, eyes practically sparkling. "Wait a second… wait— *is this when he went to Africa?! That far away place? Not the island?* "

Ryusui snapped his fingers. "The lion meat comment!"

"That's right," Ukyo said, nodding. "He mentioned having eaten lion, then we see this conversation, it follows."

Senku hummed without looking at them. “Ten billion percent. Can’t exactly study dangerous pathogens in your average school lab. Not unless you want the entire city infected.”

Chrome’s jaw dropped. “That’s *so bad!* Like—bad in the *awesome* way. You actually *left the island* ?! You crossed *entire oceans?* And it wasn’t just for science—it was for science that *helps people?* ”

Senku chuckled lightly under his breath. “What else would it be for?”

Chrome grinned so wide it almost hurt. “Man, this is crazy! I’ve never even seen anything beyond Ishigami Village until the Kingdom of Science started expanding—and now we’re gonna see a *whole other continent?!* Like... people, animals, *science* that’s totally different! This is like going on a real expedition!”

Francois adjusted their cuffs. “A foreign disease research post at such a young age… There are few institutions in the world that would risk bringing in someone so young. But I suppose that’s the point—Senku was never *just* a child.”

Senku waved a hand lazily. “It was a research assistantship. I passed a few exams, wrote some papers. Not that complicated.”

“You wrote *scientific papers* before your voice changed,” Ryusui said, incredulous. “Unreal.”

Senku scowled and fixed his hair. “Tch. Don’t be dramatic.”

But he was smiling, too.

Byakuya didn’t say *be careful,* because he knew it wouldn’t change anything. He didn’t say *are you sure?* because he trusted that Senku *always* was. Instead, he just glanced back from the kitchen and said, “I’ll start teaching myself how to pronounce hemorrhagic fever properly.”

Senku snorted.

Dinner that night was exactly as chaotic as Senku expected—Byakuya had boiled three different types of beans, mixed them together with whatever he could find in the fridge,

and proudly declared it a “protein medley.” Senku offered no compliments, but he didn’t complain either. They ate together at the kitchen table under the hum of fluorescent lights, one of them humming a half-remembered tune from an old space documentary while the other silently recalculated how long it would take to stabilize a strain of edible algae with minimal lab access.

Ryusui pointed at the screen with a bark of laughter. “ *Hold on.* Did he just try to fix his hair?!”

Gen leaned forward, eyes gleaming with amusement. “Ohhh~ my, I do believe he did. That’s a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon, folks. Young Senku, actively grooming himself.”

“I always assumed it was some kind of chemical reaction,” Ukyo added mildly, head tilted. “Like he fell into a vat of static electricity.”

Senku didn’t even glance at the screen. He just answered, completely matter-of-fact. “Genetics. Even straight hair can grow upright if the follicles are strong enough. Uncommon, but not impossible.”

He leaned back, folding his arms like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “It’s all about follicle angle and rigidity. If the dermal papilla is angled perpendicular to the scalp and the keratin matrix is dense enough, you get vertical growth. Throw in some structural keratin bonding—probably from a slightly elevated sulfur content in the amino acid chains—and you’ve got ten billion percent viable defiance of gravity.”

There was a pause.

“…So your hair stands up because it’s science?” Chrome asked, blinking hard.

Senku finally looked over, smirked. “Everything has a scientific explanation Chrome, don't you know that at this point?”

“So it’s… natural?” Kohaku blinked. “Your hair *just grows like that?* ”

“Still, seeing Senku-chan do something like fix his hair…” Gen leaned in with a sly grin, eyes gleaming. “It’s like watching a unicorn comb its mane.”

Senku shot him a flat look, unimpressed. “Speaking of weird hair…”

He angled his chin slightly toward Gen. “Your hair going half white that fast? Also science. Acute stress-induced canities. Basically, extreme trauma or chronic mental strain can trigger the sympathetic nervous system to flood the melanocyte stem cells in your hair follicles with norepinephrine. That stress response kills off the pigment cells, so the new growth comes in white.”

A beat passed.

“…In short, congrats. You quite literally stressed yourself into premature aging.” *Probably those 70 years spent mentally active in the stone, which I'm sure the Mentalist has already put together with my theory.*

Gen blinked, then laughed, dramatic as ever. “Oh, how poetic! My trauma turned aesthetic!”

“Ten billion percent not something to be proud of,” Senku muttered, but he couldn’t quite keep the corner of his mouth from twitching.

Chrome’s jaw dropped. “Wait—your *feelings* can bleach your *hair*?! That’s the craziest science I’ve ever heard!”

Later, Senku lay back in bed, hands behind his head, eyes wide open in the dark.

“Somewhere with a higher mortality rate,” he repeated to himself under his breath, this time with a smirk.

The thought didn’t scare him.

It thrilled him.

And that night, for the first time in months, Senku dreamed of science—of viruses under microscopes, of heat-split molecules in the sun, of a far-off place where the stakes were higher, the unknowns greater, and every answer had to be earned. He was going to do it. Senku could feel a grin etching onto his face, *Time to get excited. Tomorrow, I'm searching for a good program.*

Gen clicked his tongue and grinned. "*Somewhere with a higher mortality rate,* huh? Just say you're a danger addict and go, Senku-chan."

"I already did," Senku replied without missing a beat, arms folded behind his head like this was the most casual admission in the world. "You're the one playing catch-up now."

Gen blinked.

Then blinked again.

"…Wait, *that's it*? That's your big emotional admission? No lead-in? No awkward deflection? You just—*say it* now?"

Senku shrugged. "It's just the truth. Thought you liked truth, Mentalist."

Gen stared at him for a moment, then pressed a hand over his heart in mock-offense. "I had a whole slow-burn character arc planned for this revelation. You robbed me of my emotional payoff, you madman."

Ryusui let out a bark of laughter, tossing an arm over the back of his chair. "Oh, he *owns* it now. I love that. Dangerous, arrogant, self-aware—Senku, you're everything I look for in a business partner."

Gen tilted his head, eyes glinting. “Like Senku said, men only say things like *that* when they’re either flirting or trying to sell you something.”

There was a flicker of tension—quick, electric, sharp as flint.

And Ryusui, of course, noticed.

He grinned like a shark who smelled opportunity. “Why not both?” he said smoothly, voice just loud enough to carry. “Man’s got charm and chaos to spare. I would like to have that all to myself, I am the greediest man in the world, after all."

Senku wrinkled his nose, unimpressed. “Tch. Pass.”

Gen shot Ryusui a withering glare, quick and cutting, before smoothing it over with his usual silken smile.

Senku sat cross-legged at his desk, laptop glowing in the dim light of his room. Dozens of tabs were open—PDFs of international research grants, student fellowship programs, university-affiliated internships, and expedition-based fieldwork scattered across the globe. He skimmed over the requirements, scanning through each one at lightning speed.

“Neuroscience residency. Too slow-paced. Molecular botany? Sounds like babysitting flowers. Climate modeling—hm, maybe later.”

He clicked through each page with quick, practiced precision, mentally calculating the risk-reward of every single one. What he wanted wasn’t just to pad a résumé or play at academia.

He wanted *real data . Real stakes .*

One tab caught his eye.

World Medical Alliance Fellowship for Global Viral Research
Emergency deployment: Ebola surveillance & field research – DRC & Uganda sectors
Open to post-graduate researchers and certified research assistants, under faculty

oversight.
Stipend included. On-site training available.

Ryusui leaned forward, eyes gleaming with interest. “Wait, go back—*that* one said stipend included. How much are we talking here?”

Senku sighed like he was already regretting answering. “Five thousand five hundred USD a month.”

“Damn,” Gen muttered, blinking. “That’s actually pretty close to what I made back when I was still performing on the regular.” His expression turned slightly wry. “Guess risking your life and manipulating crowds pays about the same.”

“High-risk viral zones pay more,” Senku said flatly. “Especially if you’re willing to go into remote regions. They needed warm bodies. I had the qualifications.”

Ryusui let out a short, thoughtful whistle. “Pfft. That’s it?”

A second passed. Then his expression flickered.

Oh. Wait. *That’s a lot for a kid.*

He leaned back with a chuckle, arms folded behind his head, golden eyes gleaming. “Right. Forgot not everyone’s closing commodity futures on saffron before breakfast, restructuring global shipping routes over lunch, and negotiating exclusive mineral rights for dessert."

Chrome leaned toward Kohaku. “Wait, that’s a lot, right? Ryusui is making it sound like its not a lot, but it sounds like a lot a lot."

“It sounds like a lot,” she whispered back.

Yuzuriha gave a small nod. “It really is.”

Ryusui waved a hand, still grinning. “Don’t get me wrong. For a fifteen-year-old science goblin in the middle of a jungle? That’s baller.”

“So what’d you do with all that cash, King of Science?” Gen asked, tone teasing.

Senku shrugged like it was obvious. “Lodging and gear were covered. I kept what I needed for food, field supplies, and replacement equipment. The rest went into my dad’s account.”

There was a beat of stunned silence.

Taiju blinked. “Wait—you just gave it to your dad?”

Senku scratched his neck, still avoiding the screen. “He was still working two jobs to keep our setup going at one point. The man earned it.”

Yuzuriha looked like she was about to melt.

Ryusui whistled again, softer this time. “You know… for someone so loud about being a selfish genius, you’re a real softie in disguise.”

“Tch,” Senku muttered, “Ten billion percent not.”

Gen sighed dramatically. “Tragic. Beautiful. A son repaying his father in secret.”

“Don’t make it weird,” Senku snapped.

Francois gave a polite nod. “It was the right call. A field stipend is meant to ensure the researcher’s well-being. You chose to extend that well-being to someone else.”

Chrome grinned. “Yeah! You were, like, *science Robin Hood!* ” Senku wondered if he heard that from a modern person or if his idiot dad included that in the 100 tales.

Senku groaned. “You guys are *ten billion percent* unbearable.”

But he didn’t argue any further.

Senku clicked.

The page was surprisingly barebones—low budget, clearly put together by scientists who had no time for aesthetics. But that only made it more legitimate in his eyes. He opened the attached interview clips and leaned in. A weathered woman in a clean white coat spoke to the camera. She looked straight into the lens like she was daring the viewer to look away, “This isn’t a classroom. This isn’t a simulation. You come here, you’re dealing with reality. It’s messy, unforgiving, and the people who need our help don’t care if you aced your chemistry final—they want solutions. Fast.”

The name beneath her read: **Dr. Ada Okoye** — Lead Virologist, WMAG Division. Origin: Nigeria. Specialty: Hemorrhagic viral response & molecular pathology.

Chrome was already leaning forward, eyes wide and sparkling. “ *Woah!* She’s got dark skin!”

Kohaku blinked, then tilted her head slightly. “You’re right... That’s the first time I’ve seen someone who looks like that. I mean, we heard about it in the Hundred Tales, but…”

“I didn’t know it was real,” Chrome breathed. “That’s *so* bad! Like—real world humans come in all kinds of colors?”

Senku, still watching the screen, let out a quiet hum. “Of course. Humans adapted over time to survive different climates. Melanin variation isn’t cosmetic—it’s an evolutionary response to ultraviolet radiation. More melanin means more protection from high UV exposure in

equatorial regions, less melanin allows for increased vitamin D production in areas with less sunlight."

He leaned back slightly, voice picking up momentum. "It's one of the clearest examples of natural selection in action. Environmental pressure over thousands of years, fine-tuning the genetic code for survival. Ten billion percent efficient."

Then, with a glance toward the others, he added dryly, "Unlike whoever designed wisdom teeth."

Yuzuriha winced at the mention of wisdom teeth, memories bubbling up uninvited. Hers had come in early—too early—and the dentist warned they'd cause serious crowding if she didn't get them out. One miserable week of swelling, soup, and soft foods later, she'd sworn never to think about it again.

Taiju, of course, got lucky. When he went in for his X-rays, the dentist told him he might not need to remove his at all—his jaw had just enough room. And Senku? Senku had taken one look at her post-surgery misery, pulled out a notebook, and started calculating the probability of developing wisdom teeth at all. According to him, his odds were ridiculously low. Yuzuriha remembered pouting for a solid hour over that one.

"Ohh," Chrome said, nodding quickly like he was filing that away. "So cool. I wanna ask her a billion questions."

Gen folded his arms with a slow smile. "It's no surprise *you* were drawn to her, Senku. You can practically smell the brainpower through the screen."

"Not just that," Ryusui added, resting his chin on his hand. "She's got that same 'I'll die before I sugarcoat something' attitude Senku has. You two would either hate each other or sync up instantly."

"Sync," Senku said, completely unfazed. "She's the kind of scientist who actually gets things done. No frills. No posturing."

Francois gave a thoughtful nod. “The page design does support that. Sparse, efficient, information-dense. It prioritizes urgency over polish. Very much the ethos of field research. It speaks volumes.”

Yuzuriha smiled softly, watching Senku’s face. “You already knew, didn’t you? Just from the way she talked, that this was the one that you wanted to learn from?”

Senku didn’t reply at first, but his mouth twitched slightly at the corner. Seeing in the present her attitude, her fire, with his own eyes again was refreshing and nostalgic, just as it had been with his old man. Ada was something else, “She wasn’t posturing. That clip wasn’t a pitch. It was a warning.”

Ukyo glanced at him sidelong. “And you liked that.”

“I respected it,” Senku corrected. “Which is better.”

Chrome pointed at the screen again. “So this is the person who taught you stuff before the world ended?”

“She was one of the best,” Senku said, quiet for once—but not because he was holding back. Just... remembering. Her want to help people was unparalleled, the way that she would jump in to help the medbus whenever she could. The long hours trying to figure out how to best predict where the next outbreak would be, the best ways to save lives. That look in her eye was the thing that always stuck out the most, the one that he had always thought...

Chrome was still excitedly whispering to Kohaku about evolutionary skin tones when Taiju, voice hopeful and earnest, looked up toward the screen again.

“Oh! If we’re not gonna revive that Xeno guy,” he said, turning to Senku, “What about her? Dr. Okoye. She seems amazing! Can we bring her back someday?”

The room quieted.

Senku didn’t answer.

Not right away.

He just kept staring at the screen, the glow casting faint reflections in his eyes—sharper than usual, but far away. His fingers twitched once against his crossed arms, barely noticeable. He’d never told Taiju or Yuzuriha the full story. Just said he’d lost people. Left it vague. Clean. Manageable. But hearing the comment now, even in passing, hit harder than it should have. It stacked quietly on top of everything else—the weight of memories, the exposure of private thoughts, the parts of himself he hadn’t intended to share laid bare for everyone to see.

Then, without looking at anyone, he said simply, “Keep watching.”

His voice was even. Steady. But not flat.

The kind of quiet that meant he’d already thought about this— *too much.*

Gen didn’t say a word, but his smile dimmed slightly, gaze flicking to Senku’s profile. Ukyo glanced between them and made no move to speak either. Yuzuriha's lips parted like she might say something comforting—but closed again, her hand curling lightly over her chest. Ryusui tilted his head, expression unreadable, before leaning back with a soft exhale. Even Francois, who had been perfectly composed until now, folded her hands more tightly.

No one pressed him.

> The video cut to a clip of her team in the field—moving quickly in hazmat suits, loading equipment into a muddy jeep, taking water samples in a flood zone while villagers watched from a distance.

"We've worked with post-grads, med students, early researchers. You're expected to pull your weight. If you don't, you leave. But if you *can* —we'll give you access to viral samples, environmental testing kits, field-grade PCR systems, and as much field exposure as you can handle."

Senku's eyes gleamed.

It wasn't the prestige that interested him. It wasn't even the pay—though it would be more than enough to finance new equipment when he got back. It was the *challenge* . Handling biohazard protocols. Working with viral genomes. Pushing the boundaries of science while actually saving lives in real time. *That* was what made his pulse pick up.

Ryusui's eyes stayed fixed on the screen, his usual grin faded into something quieter. "This isn't the kind of science you read about in school. It feels like one of those movies about global outbreaks—or those donation commercials showing disaster zones. Can't believe Senku was right in the middle of it."

Francois nodded, their tone calm but edged with gravity. "With hemorrhagic viruses, even a moment's delay can cost lives. The line between containment and catastrophe is razor-thin."

Yuzuriha looked a little pale. "I can't even imagine… Having to work while watching people that sick— *kids* , even…"

Chrome sat forward, brow furrowed with pure curiosity and intensity. "So what do you even *do* in a place like that? What's the science look like? Like… what are the steps, Senku?"

Senku's voice came in low, cutting through the murmurs like a scalpel.

"You get a call. And from that point on, everything moves fast."

Everyone turned to look at him. His tone wasn't dramatic, wasn't exaggerated—but it was edged with something heavy. Remembered.

Senku didn’t blink. “First, you triage the outbreak. That means evaluating symptoms, ruling out false positives, and tracing every person the infected came into contact with. The clock starts *then.* You don’t get to panic. You don’t get to hesitate. You identify potential super-spreaders and start quarantine protocol.”

He shifted slightly in his seat, eyes trained on a point in the middle distance. “The virus itself has many different—has a fatality rate that can go up to *ninety percent* if untreated. Bleeding from the eyes, nose, internal organs liquefying. And it’s *fast.* You can die within days if your immune system’s weak.”

Kohaku flinched. Even Chrome went still.

Senku continued. “We’d have to take water samples, test local wells, check for bat droppings or rodent carriers. Everything gets tagged, sterilized, logged. You’re running PCR machines while sweating in hazmat gear under a hundred-degree sun. One mistake, one break in your glove seal, and you’re next.”

He looked down for a second—just a flicker.

“Most people can’t do it long. Not because of the science. But because it wears you down. Watching someone seize in front of you and knowing you don’t have the tools to help. Seeing whole villages afraid to touch their own family members.”

Yuzuriha had gone quiet.

Ukyo glanced sideways, almost cautiously. “But you still did it.”

Senku leaned back slightly, a sardonic little smile flickering across his lips. “Ten billion percent. Because even if the odds are microscopic, even if the science fails… you still try. That's what makes someone a real scientist."

Chrome’s voice came in quietly. “That’s… *badass.* ”

Senku didn’t answer. He just let the moment sit, let them picture it for what it really was: not an adventure, but something raw and brutal and painfully *real.*

And he’d do it again in a heartbeat.

He leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head, mind already racing.

"Let’s see... minimum age, 18. Waiver available for special applicants under institutional sponsorship. Hah. Loophole."

He cracked a smirk. He'd passed every university equivalency exam Japan had to offer. The faculty at Tokyo Tech already knew him by name—and not because he ever bothered to enroll. Now all he needed was to convince them that a 15-year-old could handle one of the most dangerous research deployments in the world.

Please. That was the *easy* part.

Francois folded their arms with impeccable composure, their gaze sharp as they studied the screen.

“Navigating international sponsorship protocols, waiver systems, and government clearance waivers before the age of sixteen…” Their voice was calm, but the weight behind it was unmistakable. “That is not the kind of accomplishment you stumble into. It requires obsession. Patience. Precision. It’s the mark of someone who knows exactly what they want—and isn’t afraid to seize it. There are reasons why people had others make up vacation plans rather than do it themselves. It's a whole other skill onto itself, especially when it comes to getting a visa or work permit.”

"That’s what I like about him.” Ryusui’s grin curled wider. Francois gave him a sidelong glance, and Ryusui gestured casually to the image of Senku on the screen—smirking over a laptop surrounded by chaos, “Greedy for knowledge. For challenge. For danger. The kind of greed that doesn’t waste time *wanting* things—it just goes out and *takes* them.”

He leaned in slightly, voice dropping just enough to feel intentional. “One way or another… I’m going to have that guy on my crew.”

Francois arched a brow, their expression unreadable, though the corner of their mouth twitched. “You already do.”

Ryusui laughed—low and satisfied. “Not *like that* yet. But I will.”

From where he sat in the room, Senku didn’t look over—but his hand paused briefly in his lap. He adjusted his gloves with slow precision and muttered, “You could try, oil baron . Not happening. I’m not working for any corporation. I’ve got science to do, not stock prices to inflate.”

Ryusui just smirked wider, undeterred. “Then I’ll rebuild my corporation and *fund your science.* ”

Senku froze.

For one glorious second, the Kingdom of Science watched their fearless, fast-talking genius *actually pause* mid-glove-adjustment. Like his brain had just blue-screened trying to calculate the implications. Senku was no stranger to the difference that proper funding can and did make. After all, the whole operation that he was part of in Africa was so short funded it was insane, and he wasn't incorrect in saying that it likely had something to do with the less fortunate things that happened there. If they had the funding for another medbus, for example, everything could have been different.

Ryusui caught it instantly. “Oh? Hit a nerve, did I?”

Senku clicked his tongue and looked away, adjusting his goggles like they might hide the flicker of interest. “Tch. Don’t get cocky.”

Across the room, Gen tilted his head slightly. He didn’t say anything. Didn’t smile. Just studied the exchange with unreadable eyes. The shift in his posture was subtle—only someone paying very close attention would’ve noticed the way his fingers tapped once, then stilled completely.

Corporation, huh…

He kept the thought to himself.

But he didn’t like the way Ryusui said *“have”* .

And he liked the way Senku *paused* even less. Gen hadn't gone through all the trouble of taking this slow and steady, letting Senku work to his own conclusions all the while carefully putting the scientist into situations that would subtly push him, just to have that taken away by their favourite rich blonde.

> Senku’s eyes flicked back to the name at the bottom of the screen: **Dr. Ada Okoye** . If he wanted to get accepted into this program, impressing *her* was the real challenge—not just filling out a basic form.
>
> He clicked open a new tab, already typing before the last one finished loading.
>
> “Okay, Doctor Okoye…” he murmured, fingers flying across the keyboard. “Let’s see what kind of work you respect.”
>
> It didn’t take long to find her academic footprint. Dozens of medical journals, virology papers, and conference keynotes bore her name—many of them focused on Ebola strains, viral mutation rates, and community-based outbreak containment. But what caught Senku’s eye was her dissertation from nearly two decades earlier, archived deep in a university database.
>
> *"Virological Persistence and the Sociological Implications of Hemorrhagic Epidemics: A Ground-Level View of Ebola Resurgence in Rural Communities”*

Gen leaned forward, watching the screen with interest as the past-Senku pulled up the dissertation with practiced ease.

“Ohhh~? So the great Senku Ishigami’s master plan to win over a high-level virologist was to skip all the charm and go straight for the throat,” He mused, one brow raised. “I almost feel insulted on her behalf. Sure, you are correct when you think that she is probably the type of woman who doesn't need to be charmed, but all woman, all people, enjoy getting properly wooed when you get down to it."

Yuzuriha’s eyes flicked toward the footage, her smile faint. “It’s kind of amazing… seeing him work so hard to impress someone. Not with emotions or words, just with *raw science.* I don't think I've ever seen Senku actually want to impress someone like this before."

Ryusui whistled low under his breath. “He really said, ‘I don’t need style if I have substance.’ Bold. Dangerous. I respect it.”

Then, as Senku skimmed the dissertation on-screen and began pulling citations faster than most graduate students could blink, Ryusui chuckled. “I don't blame him for wanting to work with her honestly, she seems like she is the best at her job. Still—he was *greedy* for it, huh? The challenge, the respect, the stakes. Everything about this woman’s work lit him up and made him want to work for it.”

Gen didn’t say anything right away.

He was watching Senku a little too closely—not the one on-screen, but the one sitting near him now, arms folded, face unreadable. Of course he already knew that presentation wouldn’t have mattered. Of course he didn’t bother with fluff. That was the point. Senku didn’t *try* to be liked. And somehow… that made people like him more. That was typically the case, anyway. Gen folded his hands together, resting his chin on his knuckles. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you *want* to be understood by someone before.”

Senku didn’t look at him. But his expression flickered for a moment, and that was enough.

Chrome, meanwhile, was still hung up on the visuals from earlier. “Man, look at how many papers she wrote! And she’s doing *fieldwork* too? That’s crazy. I didn’t know scientists could be *that* cool.”

“She was,” Senku said simply.

Ukyo glanced sideways. The tone was quiet—barely audible.

Senku opened the PDF and scanned the abstract. There was no hand-holding. No glossed-over summaries. Her writing was as sharp and unflinching as her interview footage—data-driven, unapologetically direct, and grounded in field experience.

He sat up straighter.

“She’s not interested in theory,” he muttered. “She wants people who’ve been in the mud—who *get* the human side of disease. Logistics. Sociology. Practical science. She wants someone who doesn’t flinch.”

That meant he’d need more than just academic brilliance on paper. He needed to prove he could handle pressure. That he already thought like a field scientist. Senku opened another tab and started pulling up his own scientific records. He already had two short publications under his belt—co-authored, sure, but his experiments were central to both. One was on bacterial cultures and water purification methods, the other a more obscure piece about magnetism and practical applications in energy harvesting.

Francois narrowed their eyes slightly. “Those are real academic papers. Peer-reviewed. For context, imagine writing one of these papers to be similar to Ruri learning the hundred tails, it's not an easy feat."

“You mean…” Chrome squinted at the list. “He already wrote those? *Before* going to Africa?”

Ukyo nodded, adjusting his posture with quiet surprise. “Looks like it. Co-authored, but still impressive. That’s no small feat for someone who wasn’t even enrolled at a university.”

“Well,” Gen drawled lightly, waving a hand, “He’s not the *only* one here who’s published papers, you know.”

Most of the group blinked.

“Wait, really?” Kohaku tilted her head, clearly curious.

“Psychology journals,” Gen said smoothly. “This was before I went full showbiz, of course. Couple of case studies, a few cognitive modeling experiments, one big piece on anticipatory suggestion and subliminal feedback in decision-making—”

“Yeah,” Senku cut in without looking up, a rare glint of appreciation in his eyes. “Those were decent. Your anticipatory suggestion model wasn’t bad. Though the signal-to-noise ratio was a little off in the second experiment. Still— *much* better than that brain-dead pop-psych books you published for simplitons.”

Gen’s mouth opened, then closed.

“…You read them?”

Senku shrugged, casual as ever. “Of course. I don’t waste time on fluff—but the real stuff? That was worth reading.”

Gen blinked, clearly caught off guard.

Then he flushed—just a little. A slow pink spread at the tips of his ears. Honestly, Senku should consider redirecting that unfair amount of unintentional charm elsewhere. It was getting dangerous.

“I—well. That’s…” Gen cleared his throat and reached for his drink, using the motion to mask the small smile threatening to tug at the corners of his mouth. “You really do know how to compliment someone and insult them in the same breath.”

Senku grinned. “Efficiency.”

Ryusui leaned back with a lazy smirk. “What’s this? The great Mentalist getting flustered? We should archive this moment. Frame it.”

“Shut up,” Gen muttered—but there wasn’t much heat behind it. His fingers lingered near his lips, hiding the fact that he couldn’t quite stop smiling. “It’s called professional validation, you uncultured capitalist.”

They’d been published in minor Japanese journals, but peer-reviewed nonetheless.

He pulled them into a folder.

Next, he created a new document and typed at the top: **Curriculum Vitae – Senku Ishigami**

“Let’s see…” he muttered, already sketching out the sections in his head. “Education equivalency, verified. Test scores, perfect. Research background, outlined. Current age… hmm.”

He paused, then shrugged. “They’ll either laugh or be intrigued. Either works.”

On screen, young Senku cracked his knuckles and started typing with machine-like efficiency. The words *Curriculum Vitae – Senku Ishigami* glowed faintly on his laptop screen as he murmured through each section like it was the most casual thing in the world.

“…He wrote a CV at fifteen,” Ukyo said, more impressed than surprised, it was Senku after all, “A real one. With actual publications and test data. I knew that he was collecting everything, but stilll impressive to see. If it was anyone other than Senku, it would be shocking.”

Francois hummed softly. “And formatted correctly. That alone is a feat. Most applicants twice his age can’t build a coherent résumé, let alone one with scientific credibility. I have been the reciever of several subpar résumés in my time.”

“Of course he did,” Ryusui chuckled, folding his arms. “Nothing more powerful than a man who knows his worth.”

Chrome leaned forward with wide eyes. “What’s a ‘Vitae’? Is that like, a warrior name or something?”

Yuzuriha giggled. “It’s like a work scroll—a list of everything you’ve done so people know how skilled you are.”

“Ohhhh,” Chrome breathed.

Gen gave a low whistle, arms draped across the back of his chair. “And said *they’ll either laugh or be intrigued.* That’s not confidence—that’s weaponized genius. Fifteen years old and you were already sending off papers like warning shots. Honestly, Senku-chan, it’s a little terrifying.”

Senku rolled his eyes. “Says the guy who got a PhD in psychology at nineteen. Don’t play coy with me, Mentalist.”

That hit its mark. Gen’s smirk faltered just slightly—just enough for Senku to catch the way his shoulders tensed, the way he averted his eyes with a laugh that was a little too airy.

“Ohh, *my* credentials were just a side hobby,” Gen deflected, fingers fluttering. “Nothing as world-changing as yours.”

But Senku caught the faint pink tint creeping up his ears and filed it away like it was data.

“Sure,” Senku said dryly. “I’m sure publishing four papers on behavioral modeling before you even hit your twenties was *just* a hobby.”

Yuzuriha looked between the two of them, wide-eyed. “Wait—you had a PhD at nineteen?!”

Gen chuckled nervously, suddenly very interested in smoothing a wrinkle out of his sleeve. “Well. It was technically eighteen and a half, but that doesn’t sound as pretty, so—”

“Holy crap,” Taiju gaped. “That’s not normal, right?”

Ryusui grinned like someone watching a chess match unfold. “Senku, are you *flustering* the Mentalist?”

Francois, lips curved in the slightest smile, sipped their tea. “It’s rare. Enjoy it while it lasts.”

Gen shot Senku a sidelong glance, eyes narrowed, lips quirking just slightly. “You’re lucky I’m fond of you, Senku-chan.”

Senku shrugged, unbothered. “Ten billion percent mutual, I guess.”

Then he paused.

Just for a second.

His brain caught up with his mouth, and he cursed it internally. *Why the hell would I say that out loud?* The words echoed back at him with far too much weight. His neck tensed. A slow flush crept up from under his collar, betraying him before he could school his expression.

Nope. Not doing this. He shifted, crossed his arms tighter across his chest, and fired up his mental checklist before the thought could settle.

- **Reason One:** Emotional attachments were inefficient distractions. He had a whole civilization to rebuild—there wasn’t time for distractions.
- **Reason Two:** Gen was a wildcard. Brilliant, sure, but unpredictable. Flirted like it was breathing. Statistically speaking, trusting that kind of variable was unwise.
- **Reason Three:** If something went wrong—if he lost him—it would hurt. A lot. And pain slowed reaction time.
- **Reason Four:** Relationships, statistically, had a high failure rate under stress. He wasn’t going to be the guy who tanked the Kingdom of Science because he couldn’t keep his emotions in check.
- **Reason Five:** He didn’t *need* it. That was the kicker. He could admire Gen’s brain, appreciate his insight, even enjoy the banter. But needing someone? That was a luxury,

not a necessity.

There. Logical. Clean. Calculated.

Except his ears were still warm.

And Gen was still watching him with that stupid amused glint like he'd just watched the entire list scroll behind Senku's eyes.

Senku wasn't under any illusions. His age was going to be a red flag—but it could also be his hook. A kid with a mastery of post-grad material, real-world experiments, and academic publications? That was memorable. He jotted a note off to the side of his digital document: *Get signed waiver from Tokyo Tech to prove readiness. Strong recommendation letter = key.*

That meant another trip to the university this week. And maybe bribing one or two of the professors with prototype gadgets. Worth it. He leaned back again, arms behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. The glow of the screen cast faint blue shadows across the dark room.

This… this felt *right* .

Ryusui let out a low whistle, arms folded behind his head. "Bribing professors with gadgets? Bold. I like it."

Francois didn't even blink. "It's effective. And very on brand."

Chrome tilted his head. "Wait... isn't that kinda like what Senku does now? Like how he got Gen to join us with that soda thing?"

Gen coughed, straightening his sleeves like the subject had veered dangerously close to sincerity. "That soda thing was a deeply moving and emotionally manipulative gift, thank you very much."

“It was a drink,” Kohaku said flatly, blinking.

“Exactly!” Gen threw one hand up like he was giving a TED Talk. “A treasure beyond measure in that moment. I was seduced by carbonation and nostalgia. Who among us wouldn’t fold for a fizzy symbol of the old world?”

Ryusui snorted. “You’re seriously saying you picked your side because of sugar water?”

“I’m saying,” Gen said smoothly, pointing a finger, “that in a desperate, emotionally fragile moment, I was offered the one thing no one else could give me: a taste of home.”

Senku didn’t even bother looking away from the screen. “Bribery is just targeted motivation. As long as it gets the job done, it doesn’t matter what flavor it comes in.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait, so you’ve *always* been like this?”

Yuzuriha laughed, covering her mouth with her hands. “It’s kind of amazing, though. He was already working professors like they were a part of some giant science machine.”

Ryusui smirked. “He still is. Except now *we’re* the parts. I guess that's probably a step down from PhD's and graduate students."

Chrome squinted suspiciously, finger raised. “Wait a second. Didn’t Senku read, like, all of Gen’s books before we even met him?”

“Ohhh,” Kohaku chimed in, catching on fast. “You’re saying he got the bribery thing from *Gen* ?”

Senku didn’t even look up. “Bribery came naturally to me. The *subtle* stuff—manipulation, behavioral nudges, getting people to think it was their idea—that’s straight out of the pop-psych garbage he wrote for his science club fanbase.”

Gen gave a huff of exaggerated offense. “Excuse me, it was *not* garbage! It was… approachable. And mildly educational.”

“Mildly being generous,” Francois added dryly.

Ryusui chuckled. “So what you’re saying is—While Senku's behavior might not have been your fault, there is a very real chance that half the people that I had to negotiate with probably read your book and made my life more difficult."

“I didn’t invent human nature!” Gen protested, hand to his heart with all the drama of a stage magician caught mid-act. “I just monetized it.”

Senku leaned back, eyes gleaming with mischief. “You should see the margin notes I left on your third chapter. Full of corrections.”

Gen turned a suspicious shade of pink. “You annotated it?”

“Like hell I’d let pseudoscience go unchallenged,” Senku said, flipping a hand lazily as if it wasn’t a big deal. “Still, it had… a few functional uses.”

Gen blinked, the words catching harder than he expected. *Margin notes.* Not casual skimming. Not a passing glance. Annotated. Studied. Dissected. He wasn’t sure what hit harder—the fact that Senku had read it *that* closely, or the fact that he had cared enough to argue with the pages like they were having a conversation.

Senku didn’t mark things for fun. He challenged things that intrigued him. And Gen knew—because he *had* tested the waters, more than once—that Senku’s preferences were cerebral.

Intelligence drew him in. Complexity held his attention. The kind of attention Gen wasn't entirely sure he was ready to have aimed at *him.*

A flicker of something sharp and unfamiliar moved through his chest.

He read it. Really read it. Argued with it. Like I was worth debating.

He recovered with a soft cough and a hand wave. "Well, corrections or not, I hope you at least admired the narrative flair. I happen to think my segue into crowd psychology was art."

Senku raised an eyebrow. "If art includes statistically inaccurate sample pools and hand-wavy generalizations, sure."

And Senku's smirk didn't fade. If anything, it grew as he watched the Mentalist squirm—just a little twitch at the edge of Gen's mouth, a too-casual flick of his wrist, a blush he pretended wasn't there. It was fascinating. A part of Senku—one he didn't like to name—liked watching the cracks in Gen's polished mask. It was like finding a flaw in a perfect gemstone and realizing it made it more valuable, not less.

But then—

He reminded himself. *Hard.*

Eyes narrowing, he mentally yanked himself back toward center. *Focus, idiot.* This was exactly what he told himself not to do. This whole situation was playing with him, he knew that he had more control over himself than this.

He could almost feel the pieces falling into place—the tension in his chest that came with anticipation, not anxiety. A puzzle to solve. A game with real stakes.

And he wasn't just going to play it. He was going to *win* .

Senku stared at the almost-finished draft of his CV for a moment longer, then flicked his eyes toward the hallway. Byakuya was home—he could hear him faintly singing along to some old pop song while cooking—and for a brief second, Senku considered getting up and showing him what he'd put together so far.

But then he stopped.

No. Not yet.

His old man would be excited— *too* excited. The kind of excitement that invited questions and praise Senku didn't have time to deal with right now. If he was going to show Byakuya, it had to be when things were airtight. When there was no room for concern. No weak points to pick at. No risk of unnecessary emotional detours.

Gen folded his arms, eyes lingering on the last image of younger Senku, posture locked in focused determination. Trying to pull himself back together distract, redirect, "That tension in his chest wasn't anxiety," he murmured, more to himself than the others. "It was momentum. I've seen that look before. That's when he's already decided the outcome. The rest is just strategy. That same look? He had it when he built the ramen stall. Right before he convinced an entire suspicious village of strangers to trust him—through noodles. Or when he walked into a sea of people who hated outsiders and calmly said, 'I'm going to win them over with science.'"

There was a flicker of something almost fond in Gen's eyes.

Ryusui leaned forward, smirking. " *He wasn't just going to play it. He was going to win.* " He snapped his fingers, eyes gleaming. "Now *that's* greed, baby. Greed for risk, for growth—for proving the impossible possible."

Chrome blinked rapidly, still trying to keep up. "Wait—he made that whole résumé by himself? And *wasn't* gonna show his dad yet?"

Senku exhaled through his nose, leaning slightly back against the table where he stood. "My old man was... a lot. All optimism. If I gave him even *half* an idea, he'd throw the whole house behind it. Maybe even literally if given half the chance," He crossed his arms. "Sometimes I needed to *finish* the idea before letting him light it on fire."

That earned a few snickers.

Gen tilted his head. “You wanted to keep control of the narrative. Smart. But I bet that old man of yours would’ve cheered you on even if the CV was scribbled in crayon.”

Senku didn’t answer at first—but a tiny, involuntary smile tugged at his mouth.

“Yeah,” he said. “He would’ve.”

> “No point showing him until I’ve got the letters,” Senku muttered, narrowing his eyes at the glowing screen again.
>
> He needed legitimacy. Adult legitimacy. Letters of recommendation from people who had *already* earned their place in the scientific community.
>
> Which meant... Tokyo Tech. He had a few names in mind—professors who’d let him sit in on graduate-level lectures when he was barely old enough to shave. One of them had even let him conduct a side project on bacterial transfer in shared lab spaces—under the table, but it got results. Professor Imai. Professor Takashiro. Dr. Fujino. Senku opened his email and started writing. Straight to the point, no fluff.
>
> *Dear Professor Imai, this is Senku Ishigami. I’m applying for an international virology research program based in Africa under Dr. Ada Okoye. I believe your insight on my work in the XLAB water filtration project may provide valuable perspective. Would you be willing to provide a letter of recommendation? Happy to provide any documentation you need.*

Chrome leaned in, eyes wide. “Wait, wait—how’d he even meet those professors? Aren’t they, like... super high-up science chiefs or something?”

“He means university professors,” Yuzuriha translated with a soft smile.

Senku didn’t look away from the screen. “I sat in on their lectures.”

Chrome blinked. “You *what?* Like… you *walked* into their learning labs?”

“Classrooms,” Ukyo murmured.

“Yes,” Senku said flatly. “The real ones. At Tokyo Tech.”

Ryusui laughed. “You *just walked in?* No credentials, no invitation?”

Senku shrugged. “I wore a lab coat. Brought a notebook. Didn’t talk to anyone unless I had to. Nobody questions someone who looks like they know what they’re doing.”

“That,” Francois said with a faint smile, “Is disturbingly true.”

“Still,” Gen drawled from his seat, arms folded loosely, “Why didn’t you just graduate early? I tested out and jumped straight into grad studies. You clearly had the credentials.”

Senku’s smirk curled slow and sharp. “Because I didn’t want to waste time writing papers about things I already knew. I wanted real science—not coursework. And besides...” he flicked his gaze toward the screen where his younger self typed away, “I had access to the research anyway.”

“Translation,” Ryusui grinned, “He didn’t want to play by the rules unless they were *his* rules.”

Kohaku tilted her head. “That’s... very Senku.”

Taiju scratched his head. “So wait, instead of just being, like, done with school, you *chose* to keep going but harder?”

“Sounds about right,” Gen said, eyeing the screen. “Honestly? That’s one of the most terrifying things I’ve ever heard.” Privately, he still found it genuinely unsettling—Senku had willingly subjected himself to mundane high school life, knowing he could’ve skipped straight to something more fulfilling. Gen couldn’t help but wonder if boredom was just another game Senku played to keep his mind sharp.

Senku rolled his eyes. “Again, pretty rich coming from the guy who graduated with a psychology doctorate at nineteen.”

Gen blinked—and to everyone’s surprise, actually flushed a little. “I mean... mine wasn’t that impressive...”

“It was still ten billion percent better than the fluff you stuffed into your pop psychology books,” Senku added dryly. “At least back then you bothered using actual citations.”

He copied the template, adjusted it slightly for each professor, and hit send without hesitation. He already knew how to optimize the subject lines for response rates, already anticipated what questions they might send back. He was betting at least two of the three would respond positively. And he wasn’t going to wait around doing nothing while he did. He pulled out a notepad and started jotting down logistical items he’d need if this worked out:

- Travel vaccine requirements
- International minor travel laws
- Gear for dry environments
- Portable distillation setup (prototype?)
- Satellite phone backup?
- Intro to cultural anthropology texts
- Local dialect cheat sheets

Senku’s mind raced faster than his pen could keep up, and he didn’t bother slowing it down. This was *real* . Not just a classroom experiment or a pet project. This was the kind of chaos he’d been craving.

He glanced over at the folder labeled “Okoye_Publications” and cracked a rare smile.

I’m gonna be in your lab soon, Dr. Okoye. Just wait.

“That’s what makes him scary,” Gen added quietly. “He doesn't hope things will work. He's fast. He plans so precisely, they can't help but fall into place.” It was more than just careful

planning; it was the sheer inevitability Senku built into every scenario. Gen knew manipulation, strategy, and psychology intimately, yet Senku wielded probability itself as effortlessly as breathing—turning chaos into something structured, predictable, and utterly inescapable.

Senku leaned back on the crates behind him, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. “Of course I didn’t wait. That’s a waste of time. If you don’t move while the window’s open, you miss the opportunity.”

François skimmed Senku’s supply list, stopping sharply on one particular item. Their expression shifted to something subtly disdainful. “Master Senku, anthropology? Forgive me, but introductory texts in that discipline often prove troubling. They spend considerable time romanticizing questionable methods like salvage anthropology and ethnocentric comparisons of cultures—approaches I'm certain you’d find deeply distasteful.”

Senku waved it off dismissively, grimacing slightly as he remembered his brief encounter with the books in question. “Yeah, trust me—I figured that out within the first chapter. I ditched that fluffy, self-congratulatory crap immediately.”

The clock on the wall blinked past 3:00 a.m.

Senku didn’t notice. He was halfway through organizing his publication list when he finally slumped, chin resting on one hand, the other still loosely gripping a pen. Scribbles covered the pages around him—travel preparations, local pathogens, climate adjustments, lab gear specs, emergency backup plans. His eyelids drooped despite himself.

The last coherent thing he wrote: *UV sterilization kit – portable, minimal power draw.*

Then his pen trailed off the edge of the page, and he was out cold.

Sometime later, footsteps padded quietly into the room. Byakuya stood in the doorway, arms crossed, expression unreadable. For a long moment, he just watched his son—bent awkwardly over his desk, papers scattered everywhere, one arm twitching slightly as if he was still running calculations in his dreams. Byakuya stepped closer and lifted a few of the papers carefully, scanning over Senku’s notes.

He didn’t understand *everything* —but he didn’t need to.

He recognized field-ready gear checklists, survival prep, and water filtration prototypes. The kind of things you didn’t prepare unless you were planning to go somewhere risky. Really risky.

His eyes fell on a name written neatly at the top of one page: *Dr. Ada Okoye – field virology, Ebola specialization.*

And below that, Senku's email draft to Professor Imai. Already sent. Byakuya let out a quiet breath. There wasn't even a shred of doubt in his chest. Of course Senku would get accepted. Of course he'd already handled the paperwork and references and short-term goals like it was a game.

All I can do now, Byakuya thought to himself, *is make sure he doesn't go in unprepared.*

Yuzuriha sat forward slightly, hands folded in her lap. "He didn't even try to wake him up. Just… saw everything Senku was doing and trusted him completely. Byakuya always did that—trusted Senku without question." Her voice softened further, becoming wistful. "Senku was lucky to have someone like that. Byakuya was always so welcoming whenever I came over." *More like a dad to me than my own parents ever managed to be.*

Her quiet admiration was tinged with something bittersweet, and it made Gen glance sideways at her before returning his eyes thoughtfully to the screen.

"He didn't even flinch when he saw *Ebola* on the page," Yuzuriha murmured.

Senku shifted where he sat, arms crossed, gaze steady on the screen. "It's because he knew I'd already made the decision. There was no point in trying to talk me down."

"That," Gen said, leaning in with a lopsided grin, "Or he knew you'd just science your way into it anyway and figured he might as well be part of the safety net."

Senku huffed. "You say that like it's not what *any* logical parent would do."

Yuzuriha smiled, eyes still focused on the screen. "No, Senku. That's what a *good* parent would do."

There was a pause.

Gen let out a quiet chuckle. Wanting to change the subject, if only for Yuzuriha's quiet parent issues, “And what did our boy genius do with all that trust?” He nudged Senku gently with his elbow. “Ran himself into the ground at three a.m. without eating or sleeping.”

Senku gave him a side-eye. “Like you’ve never stayed up forty-eight hours chasing a thesis deadline.”

“I *definitely* have,” Gen replied with a grin. “And I also had someone drag me to bed before I passed out.”

Senku’s expression didn’t shift—at least, not noticeably—but his mind snagged on the words. *Someone dragged him to bed?* That didn’t sound like a parent. Ten billion percent not. That was—

He clenched his jaw and stared a little harder at the screen.

Doesn’t matter. Irrelevant. Get a grip, brain.

It was an old reflex, that spark of irritation curling at the edge of something he refused to name. He wouldn't do the whole *romantic attachment* thing. That was for people with time to waste, not people trying to reverse-engineer civilization. And yet, the idea of Gen being close enough to someone for *that* —

He dragged his focus back. Scrubbed the thought out with mental bleach. There was science on the screen. A mission in motion. *That* was what mattered.

Beside him, Gen kept talking, oblivious to the flicker of emotion Senku had already shoved down and buried under layers of pragmatism

The next morning, Senku stirred awake, drool dried at the corner of his mouth and a faint crick in his neck. He blinked at the early sunlight filtering in, then glanced toward his desk—now… slightly neater? The checklist he'd been writing had a few new marks next to it. And there, just off to the side:

- Foldable solar charger
- Emergency rations
- Satellite phone, unlocked
- Water testing strips
- Multi-environment field notebook
- Drybags
- Extra compression socks (a note next to this one just read: *Yes, I know you won't wear them, bring them anyway.*)

Senku blinked. Once. Twice.

Then he sat up and turned toward the kitchen, where he could hear a kettle beginning to boil.

Byakuya peeked in a moment later with a grin. "Oh hey, you're up! Thought I'd grab a few things since *someone* clearly wasn't going to wait until the last minute."

Senku squinted at him. "You're an idiot."

"Yup," Byakuya said easily. "An idiot with top-tier survival instincts. Also, your email's dinged like three times in the last ten minutes."

"Compression socks?" he drawled, one brow lifting in delight. "Oh, Senku-chan~? Something you're not telling us?"

Senku made a *face* . Not a dramatic one—but a brief, tight flicker of annoyance, like he'd been caught with his lab coat half-buttoned. "I used to have plantar fasciitis."

There was a beat.

Chrome tilted his head. "What's that?"

"It's inflammation in the tissue along the bottom of the foot," Senku explained flatly, eyes flicking toward the screen as if trying to will it away. "Usually from strain. I walked funny as a kid. I switched to wide toe box shoes and adjusted my gait. Mostly managed it with

stretches and the right footwear. After petrification, it's gone. I haven't had any symptoms since."

"Ohhh," Gen said, nodding in mock solemnity. "So the miracle of stone sleep cured your *old man feet.* "

"Ten billion percent I'll kill you," Senku muttered, folding his arms with stiff discomfort.

But the color on his face wasn't anger—it was *awkwardness* . Like being reminded of something deeply mundane in a world where they now lived off sulfuric acid and lightning batteries. He didn't *want* to be reminded of weird old foot pain. Or the fact that Gen had asked. Or the fact that, for whatever reason, his heart had thumped just slightly faster when Gen had asked him questions of any sort.

Gen didn't push it. He just let a little grin settle on his lips, flicking his gaze sidelong, thoughtful. He'd caught the flinch. Not just from the question—but from Senku's own *reaction* to having to answer. *Something personal* , something human, that didn't fit into a neat scientific equation.

Yuzuriha glanced between them, quietly amused but polite enough not to say anything. Ryusui snorted into his hand.

"I still think it's wild," Chrome said, leaning forward. "That getting turned to stone actually fixed stuff like that. Can it *really* do that?"

Senku seemed almost *grateful* for the shift. "Theoretically, yes. Depending on the mechanism of petrification. If the organic matter was restored in optimal genetic alignment, even minor wear and tear—like inflammation or damage—would reset. It's not perfect, but in certain cases…"

Senku spun around in his chair and pulled up his inbox. The top message was from:

Professor Imai
Subject: Re: Letter of Recommendation Request – Senku Ishigami

Senku-kun,
I'm thrilled to hear about your application. I remember your filtration project vividly—it was some of the most efficient modeling we saw that year. I'd be happy to provide a letter of recommendation. Just send over any additional materials or forms the program requires, and I'll get it written up this week.

Good luck—and keep pushing boundaries.

—Imai

Senku's fingers hovered over the keyboard for a second. Then a rare smile curled across his lips. Everything was lining up. Fast. He glanced at the supplies by the door, already bagged and ready. Byakuya didn't need to ask questions. Didn't need to wait for confirmation. He believed. Unshakably. That kind of support... well, Senku would never admit it out loud, but it made things a lot easier. And at least now he didn't have to waste time shopping.

He spun his chair back toward his checklist and cracked his knuckles.

Time to prep a world-class research application.

Ryusui let out a low whistle as the message from Professor Imai appeared on the screen. "A top-tier recommendation on the *first try* ? That's our Senku!"

"Wait, he *already* had his bags packed?" Chrome blinked. "That wasn't even a sure thing yet!"

Francois nodded thoughtfully. "It was a calculated certainty. That level of confidence—and preparation—is no small thing." They didn't say the word, but the look in their eyes said it clearly: *impressive.*

Kohaku watched the rare smile flicker across the younger Senku's face. It was small—almost smug—but not in the arrogant way he usually wore when talking about explosions. This was different. Quieter. *Earned* . Her expression softened. "He really meant it. He wanted to help people."

"And his dad..." Yuzuriha said softly, smiling as the screen lingered on the gear neatly stacked by the door. "He never even asked. Just... believed in him."

Taiju nodded, the emotion clearly hitting a little harder than expected. “That’s the kind of parent everyone should have...”

There was a moment of silence.

Even Senku, watching it all play out again, didn’t crack a joke right away. His eyes were on the bagged supplies, the glowing screen, the version of himself who’d been just a little less guarded. But then he scoffed, arms crossed. “Tch. Ten billion percent he was just excited I wasn’t using his kitchen for fermenting again.”

Gen thought back to Senku’s recent behavior—the subtle shifts, the calculated pauses, those moments of interest the scientist immediately tried to disguise as something else. He'd been careful to give Senku space, cautious not to push him past comfort, but maybe the scientist was finally ready for a gentle test. Nothing so obvious as measuring the man's pulse again, but something subtle, a playful nudge...

Gen leaned forward slightly, eyes glinting. “Publishing before sixteen. Ambitious. You really do make the rest of us look bad.”

Senku didn’t look up from the screen. “Tch. Just trying to impress the right minds.”

“Oh?” Gen’s tone turned playful—not mocking, just curious and gently teasing. Guiding. “And whose mind were you trying to impress, exactly?”

There was a beat.

Then, far too quickly to have been planned, Senku muttered, “Would you write me a letter of recommendation, Dr. Asagiri?”

Silence.

Chrome blinked, unsure if he'd even heard right. Yuzuriha opened her mouth, then closed it again. Even Ukyo's eyebrows twitched slightly upward.

Gen simply stared at him.

Senku clicked his tongue sharply and turned away, ears noticeably red beneath his hairline. Stupid. He hadn't meant to say it like that—it was supposed to sound sarcastic, dismissive, a clever deflection to puncture the tension building in his chest whenever Gen looked at him that way. But it hadn't come out sarcastic at all. And judging by the slow, amused smile tugging at the corner of Gen's mouth, it hadn't landed that way either.

Gen still said nothing, just studied Senku with that unreadable tilt of his head, like he'd been handed an intriguing puzzle and was deciding whether to solve it or savor it. Typical mentalist—exactly the reaction Senku had been hoping to avoid.

Senku stubbornly refused to look at him again.

Instead, he glared at his screen. *This is why I need to shut my mouth. Stick to the damn plan, ten billion percent.*

Senku wasn't exactly *nervous* .

Nervousness implied irrationality. It implied doubt without data, fear without framework. He didn't *do* nervous. What he *did* do was routine: meticulously optimized, distraction-filled, high-output productivity. If his mind had even one second of rest, it would start spiraling through worst-case scenarios. So instead, he tripled his lab workload. Byakuya knew better than to interrupt. He let Senku hole up in their cluttered little apartment lab, pretending not to notice when beakers clinked louder than usual, or when Senku scrolled through his inbox for the fifth time in a minute. Occasionally, he'd hover in the doorway with a cup of bean soup and say nothing. Occasionally, Senku would take it without a word.

The evenings were worse. That's when time slowed down.

Senku started building a new microcontroller for fun. Then he started working out a fermentation process to synthesize ethanol more efficiently—again, for fun. Then he alphabetized his science books by field *and* by author last name *and* by publication year.

Byakuya watched this with great amusement, jotting all of it down in a private mental notebook titled *"Signs Senku's Losing His Mind."*

"Alphabetized *three ways* ? That's a man on the brink."

Francois folded their arms, nodding with professional gravity. "A common behavior among those attempting to exert control over uncertain circumstances. I've seen similar patterns among overburdened logistics officers."

Chrome blinked. "Wait, so, when he says *he's not nervous* ... that's like... when a volcano says *it's not active* while it's rumbling and spitting lava?"

"Pretty much," Gen said cheerfully, propping his chin in his hand. "Classic Senku. The harder he tries to hide an emotional reaction, the more obvious it becomes." He paused, lips quirking into a playful smirk as his eyes flickered toward Senku again. "But I have to admit, watching him spiral productively is pretty adorable."

Senku scoffed sharply from where he sat, refusing to look up. "It's called staying efficient, mentalist. Maybe you'd recognize it if you spent less time psychoanalyzing everything."

"Oh, I stay *very* efficient," Gen replied sweetly, eyes gleaming. "Just not by categorizing my trauma in alphabetical order."

Yuzuriha stifled a laugh behind her hand. "He's just focused! That's not a crime."

"It is," Ukyo said dryly, "if it leads to reorganizing your entire personal library three times in one night."

Taiju furrowed his brow. "Wait, was he really just building stuff for *fun* ? Like, not even for a specific plan?"

Kohaku blinked. “That... doesn’t sound like the Senku we know.”

Gen hummed thoughtfully, then murmured, mostly to himself, “More proof that he was more anxious than he wanted to admit…”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but the look in his eyes was unusually soft.

Senku pretended not to notice—and *definitely* didn’t comment on how accurate it all was. Instead, he hunched a little lower, grumbled something about *efficiency ratios* , and resolutely avoided looking in Gen’s direction. This was so not good, exactly the type of awkwardness that he was hoping to avoid by NOT having any sort of relationship with the Mentalist.

> One night, Byakuya tried to be casual. "Hey. You know, it's okay to be a little restless. You *did* just apply to spend months in the field, halfway across the world. Maybe Africa’s even farther than space, huh?"
>
> Senku, curled up on the couch with a chemistry journal and three parallel To-Do lists, didn’t look up. "No point getting worked up before results come in. Either I'm accepted or I’m not. Also, technically it is. The Karman Line – is only 100 kilometers away.”

The moment the line played, Chrome leaned forward like he was watching a trick candle relight. “Wait—what’s the Karman Line? That a border or something?”

Senku didn’t respond immediately. He was staring—a bit too intently—at the corner of the screen, the flickering glow dancing across the ship’s TV. Truthfully, he hadn’t been able to focus properly since his earlier slip—since he'd impulsively asked Gen for that ridiculous letter of recommendation. His fingers twitched restlessly against the seat, itching to build something—anything—to distract from the weird knot tightening in his chest. How the hell had he let himself get this sloppy?

When Senku finally spoke, his voice was too controlled, too steady, clearly compensating for his internal chaos. “It’s the boundary between Earth’s atmosphere and space,” he said flatly. “About a hundred kilometers straight up. Arbitrary, but internationally accepted. Anything past that’s technically outer space.”

Chrome blinked. “Only a hundred?! That’s it?!”

“Yup. Space is closer than you think.” Senku clicked his tongue sharply, words now spilling out faster than usual. “Africa, though—that’s over eleven thousand kilometers from Japan. Farther, harder to return from, too, depending on resources, timing, and route logistics—” He stopped abruptly, jaw tightening at his own unnecessary detail. He knew damn well nobody had asked for specifics like route logistics.

Across from him, Gen was watching closely. Not the screen—Senku. He hadn’t missed how Senku’s entire body had stiffened at his own rambling, or the subtle defensive flare in his eyes as he threw out facts no one had requested. Gen’s lips twitched into a quiet, amused smile as he recognized Senku’s classic overcorrection—the scientist’s instinctive attempt to bury awkward tension under a deluge of irrelevant scientific trivia. It was like watching someone shovel dirt over a live wire, hoping desperately to ground the electric charge.

Senku kept his gaze locked straight ahead. Too focused. Stubbornly refusing to meet Gen’s knowing eyes.

“Besides,” he added hastily, practically tripping over himself to move past the silence, “It’s not like they had better tech or anything. Just more pathogens. Basically a very hot lab. With insects.”

Ukyo tilted his head slightly, expression carefully neutral. “That sounded suspiciously like a deflection.”

“That’s because it was,” Gen said lightly, voice full of velvet amusement. He leaned forward slowly, eyes glittering with quiet mischief. “Though, I have to admit—I’m flattered. Is this your version of flirting?”

Senku’s spine went rigid.

“Absolutely not,” he snapped, far too sharply to sound convincing.

“Ten billion percent sure?” Gen asked sweetly.

Senku’s jaw clenched. He didn’t respond—he didn’t trust himself to.

"Still thinking about your backup plan if you don’t get in?"

Senku flipped the page. “There isn’t one.”

That quieted even Byakuya. But secretly, it made him proud as hell.

Senku had repurposed a third of the kitchen counter for his latest obsession: vaccine preservation.

"Cold chain logistics," he muttered to himself, scribbling numbers onto a whiteboard already half-covered in equations. "Minimum required temperature stability, thermal conductivity of local clay insulation, energy output of portable solar..."

Gen didn’t usually get too drawn in by flashbacks. He preferred to make comments just to make the current Senku squirm. So, sure, and he’d been enjoying the hell out of seeing what made Senku tick. But this part? This part dug in. On the screen, fifteen-year-old Senku flipped the page like it meant nothing. Like declaring he had no backup plan for flying across the world into a literal viral hot zone was just another Tuesday. Gen's lips parted slightly. Because of course he said it like that. Of course he meant it.

That was Senku, wasn’t it? Always two steps ahead, but never in retreat. The kind of person who didn’t bother preparing for failure—not out of arrogance, but because he’d already optimized the outcome. His confidence was the kind that made people lean in, want to follow, want to figure him out—

Gen’s gaze slid from the screen to the real thing.

Present-day Senku was sitting about three feet farther from him than usual. Not subtly, either. Practically anchored to the far cushion like proximity might ignite something. He hadn’t even made another joke since the letter line. No smug comeback, no dry brush-off. Just... stiff, overly composed silence.

And that? That was rare.

Gen leaned forward, resting his chin in his hand as he studied him. The same Senku who once built a full electrolysis rig out of junk metal and stubborn will. The same Senku who declared war on petrification without a shred of hesitation. And here he was, looking like he'd rather be flung into low orbit than sit beside Gen after one comment that maybe—just maybe—slipped a little too close to interest.

Huh.

Gen's eyes narrowed, just slightly. The knowledge settled into his chest like a warm cup of tea: heavier than he expected, but not unpleasant.

Past Senku might have been terrifyingly driven—but this one? This Senku who misfired one line of flirtation and immediately fled the battlefield like he'd just set fire to his own dignity?

Gen kind of wanted to laugh. But he didn't. Because that one sentence— *"There isn't one"* —it echoed. Not just in Senku's goals, but in how he handled the people close to him. Like there was no plan B for relationships either. No do-overs, no reboots. Just live and die by the same logic.

Gen rubbed a knuckle beneath his chin, expression unreadable.

> The theory was simple: if he could maintain a stable sub-zero temperature using only scavenged or low-cost components, he'd impress the field team *and* solve one of the biggest problems in remote medical access. All in one go. He was already plotting which components he'd smuggle through airport security, which materials he'd source on location. Everything else had faded. Meals, sleep, even the group chat from Taiju and Yuzuriha.
>
> [Taiju, 10:34am] → "Any news yet, bro??"
>
> [Yuzuriha, 10:36am] → "We're all rooting for you! Don't forget to eat something that isn't lab paste. <3"

[Taiju, 11:15am] → "Did the email come?? I bet it came. You're probably just ignoring us again lol."

Senku had typed half a response twice and deleted it both times. He wasn't annoyed—they were being supportive. But support didn't change that his internal clock had *just* ticked past hour 29.3, and according to his chart of return probabilities based on over 400 data points scraped from international research grant programs, that meant his acceptance likelihood had dropped to 46.2%.

Chrome's jaw dropped slightly. "Wait, wait, *he calculated his chances of getting accepted by the hour* ?!"

Ryusui gave a low whistle, arms crossed. "Now *that's* the kind of greedy I like to see. Betting against the clock like it's a market you can outsmart."

Yuzuriha's brow furrowed as she read the old messages on screen.

Taiju scratched his head. "I *did* think it was weird he wasn't answering. He always reads everything... even if he pretends he doesn't."

Francois adjusted their posture slightly, watching the younger Senku with a critical eye. "There is a fine line between dedication and tunnel vision. But I must say… optimizing emotional regulation with statistical modeling is an impressively cold-blooded approach."

Gen, though, was silent. His gaze stayed fixed on the image of Senku hunched over his makeshift whiteboard, scribbling like his life depended on it. Not flustered, not panicked—just *focused* . Even surrounded by affection and friendship, he'd chosen numbers and risk assessments over reassurance. Classic Senku.

But then Gen tilted his head just a little, watching more closely.

There'd been *something* in the way Senku had hovered over those messages—twice deleting a reply. He hadn't ignored them out of indifference.

It was restraint.

He was scared to hope.

Gen's smile softened just slightly.

“Still the same, huh?” he murmured, mostly to himself.

Senku, sitting on the couch in present day, glanced sideways. “I heard that.”

“I know,” Gen replied, smile widening. Gen didn’t press further. He just let the silence stretch —calm, quiet, comfortable.

Too comfortable.

Senku shifted on the couch.

“Quit looking at me like that,” he muttered.

“Like what?” Gen asked innocently, not even glancing his way.

“Like you’re... mapping a personality profile and filing it under ‘emotionally constipated genius.’”

Gen gave a small hum. “I mean, you did say it, not me.”

“Not with those words.”

“But the tone was there.”

Senku huffed, turning his attention back toward the screen. His pulse had picked up again—just enough for him to notice. He pressed two fingers together against his knee, grounding himself.

He liked Gen. **He knew** he liked Gen.

Which was exactly why he needed to squash it.

Too unpredictable. Too personal. Too distracting.

It wasn’t catastrophic.

But it wasn’t great.

He took a breath. Recalculated.

Factored in timezone difference. Rechecked the spam folder. Nothing.

He stared at the numbers for another thirty seconds, then crossed out the estimate and rewrote it with a red pen:

42.9%

...Tch.

The fridge whirred softly behind him as he packed ice into his makeshift thermos, checking to see how long it would keep its internal temperature before failing.

"Preserve vaccines in the Ugandan dry zone for at least 12 hours... might need to switch out the polymer base..."

It was only when he realized he had been pacing for fifteen minutes that he finally forced himself to stop. Rest. Distract his brain before it started doing the thing it always did—overanalyzing everything he couldn’t control. He dropped onto the couch with a grunt, grabbed his tablet, and opened a new simulation.

That was when the inbox pinged.

Just once.

Ryusui let out a slow whistle. “Is it just me, or does watching him spiral like that feel... illegal?”

“It’s a little bit terrifying,” Chrome added, wide-eyed. “Like—Senku doesn’t get nervous. That’s not a thing he does.”

“Well,” Yuzuriha said gently, “He was fifteen. Even genius kids are still kids sometimes.”

Francois folded their arms, gaze thoughtful. “I suspect the concern lies not in the presence of nerves, but in how expertly he hides them now. He hasn’t changed his methods—just the polish.”

Ukyo gave a slow nod. “You can almost hear the gears overclocking.”

Senku didn’t blink. Didn’t move.

Then, deliberately, precisely, he leaned forward and tapped the screen.

[Re: Research Assistantship Application – Dr. Okoye]

Senku’s hand hovered over the trackpad for a second longer than usual. Then he clicked.

Mr. Ishigami,

Your application was reviewed with great interest. Your early research contributions and academic independence are… unusual, to say the least. That said, I do not make decisions based on age or tradition. I make them based on data, reasoning, and potential. And your potential is significant.

I’d like to move forward with a virtual interview as soon as possible. If you are available, I’ve included a link to my schedule below—choose a time within the next 72

hours. If our conversation goes well, we will proceed directly to placement preparations.

Respectfully,

Dr. Ada Okoye
Lead Virologist — Pathogenic Outbreak Research Coalition

Gen let out a thoughtful hum, tilting his head with a smile. “You know... even if we didn’t know how it ends, I think just seeing Senku-chan get the interview would’ve been enough. He’s too impressive to turn away once he starts showing off his science. That kind of confidence? Ten billion percent convincing.”

He said it casually, like he always did—smooth and light—but it landed differently this time. The words weren’t for the Senku on the screen. They were for the one sitting right here, now, arms crossed as he watched his younger self field an invitation to the most dangerous internship on the planet like it was just another line item on a checklist.

Senku didn’t react outwardly. He didn’t twitch, didn’t smirk, didn’t even shift in his seat. But internally?

Something clenched.

It was stupid. Illogical. Nothing that required a response. And yet—

Why does it matter that he thinks that?

He tried to chalk it up to ego—any scientist would feel some pride hearing their work praised. But it didn’t quite land. Not when it was *Gen* saying it. Not when that smile had a softness to it that wasn’t entirely professional.

He focused back on the screen.

Anything to stop himself from looking left.

Senku let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Not acceptance. Not yet. But not rejection either. He clicked through to the scheduling link and scanned the time zones. A few slots were already taken—damn, the woman moved fast—but there were still openings in the early morning, Japan time. He selected the soonest one: 6:00 a.m. tomorrow.

Confirmed.

Then he stood up, cracked his neck, and stared down at his monitor.

Gen exhaled a quiet breath as the screen showed Senku calmly selecting an interview time that was—apparently—only a handful of hours away. He let out a sharp little laugh, eyebrows rising in disbelief. "Seriously? He gave himself, what, *twelve hours* tops? And still chose the earliest available slot? That's either arrogance or insanity." He tapped a finger to his temple, smirking. "When I prepped for my doctoral interviews, I had a week of research, memorized the panel's publishing history, studied their interpersonal dynamics, even mapped out likely stress-test questions based on tone patterns. The usual mentalist toolkit."

He paused, glanced toward Senku—and then did a double take.

Senku was staring, looking at him again even after avoiding meeting his eyes for the last hour or so.

Not in judgment. Not in challenge. Just… listening. Deeply, intently. His head tilted slightly as if he were analyzing each word, memorizing it—like Gen had just dropped something genuinely valuable into his world of logic. And maybe he had. That kind of detailed social strategizing wasn't how *Senku* operated… but suddenly, he looked like he might want to understand it.

Gen faltered for half a second, that familiar flicker of pink creeping up his neck.

And then Yuzuriha, who had been quietly watching from her spot beside Taiju, let out a tiny breath.

“Senku,” she said gently, brushing her hands against the edge of her dress as she stood. “Could I talk to you for a second?”

He blinked, turning slowly like a robot rebooting mid-task. “Now?”

“Yeah.” She smiled—soft, but insistent. “Just for a minute. Come on.”

Senku hesitated, glancing at the screen, then at her. Then, with a low sigh and a mutter of something like *“pointless emotional detour”* under his breath, he stood and followed her into the hallway.

Gen faltered for half a second, that familiar flicker of pink creeping up his neck. *I knew he was sapiosexual—and sure, I’ve used it to tease him before—but I didn’t mean to this time.* That look Senku gave him, the way he’d just... locked in, utterly transfixed—it wasn’t the usual back-and-forth between them. It wasn’t calculated banter. It felt like something slipped out, like something real.

And now Senku was out in the hallway with Yuzuriha, looking like he was one miscalculation away from overheating.

Gen smoothed his expression into something unreadable and leaned back, fingers steepling under his chin. He didn’t say anything. But his mind was *buzzing* .

And that buzzing wasn’t scientific. Not even a little.

The hallway outside the viewing room was quiet, the sound of distant cicadas humming faintly through the open windows. Why there was one of those as close to the boat as it was, Senku didn't know. It was weird behavior for that particular bug type for sure, perhaps if he found it and look a look he could figure out why. That would also get him off this ship and away from just, everything, for a minute.

He stood stiffly, arms crossed, gaze fixed on the far wall like he could calculate his way through the moment. Yuzuriha stood a few feet away, hands clasped neatly in front of her, eyes watching him in that gentle way she always had—like she saw more than people wanted her to.

Senku didn’t say anything.

Didn’t *need* to. The heat still lingered on his face from the way he’d looked at Gen. And the way Gen had noticed.

Yuzuriha rocked slightly on her heels. “You okay?”

Senku snorted softly. “Of course I’m okay. I really didn't need to get dragged into a hallway for a surprise friendship intervention.”

Her lips quirked. “You looked like your brain was overheating. I figured a breeze might help.”

Senku shifted his weight, avoiding her eyes. “Tch. I was just… thinking.”

Yuzuriha tilted her head. “About Gen?”

Senku made a strangled noise deep in his throat—something between a scoff and a cough. “About the *situation* ,” he corrected, too quickly. “We’re watching past data. Logically, I was evaluating the social dynamics and psychological responses—”

“Senku.”

Her voice was soft, but it stopped him cold.

He fell silent. Staring. Eyes narrowed but not defensive—more like someone trying to guard something brittle. Yuzuriha didn't press, not exactly. She just let the pause linger, the same way she used to when Taiju was flailing his way through a confession before running away or when Senku refused to admit he was running a fever at 14.

Finally, he sighed, looking away.

"I wasn't planning to *do* anything about it," he muttered.

"I didn't say you were."

"I just… I already told myself I wouldn't." His voice dropped lower. "It be a good use of time right now. We both have a lot on our plates."

Yuzuriha didn't answer at first. Then she stepped closer and said quietly, "Since when has everything about you been logical?"

Senku blinked.

"Not *everything* , Senku," she went on. "Not your need to help people. Not the way you get caught up in the stars when you think no one's looking. Not the way you light up when someone actually understands you."

He was very still.

"I'm not saying you have to act on it," she said gently. "But you don't have to look like you're about to throw yourself off a mental cliff every time someone sees it. Or every time you flirt with him. Or he flirts with you, especially since he flirts with a lot of people. That kind of stuff can just be friendly too. Plenty of friends do that sort of thing, don't overthink it too much. Relax a little bit."

Senku's fingers twitched slightly at his side. He let out a breath. "I wasn't throwing myself off anything. I was… calculating the probability of something stupid happening."

Yuzuriha smiled. "You've already passed *that* threshold, I think."

He rolled his eyes. "Great."

They stood there for another beat. Then Senku exhaled slowly and glanced sideways. "Don't clue him in on this conversation."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she said. "But... You're bad at this, really bad. Also, we are talking about Gen. He already knows what we were going to talk about the moment I pulled you out of the room."

Senku closed his eyes. "…Ten billion percent chance you're right." *For her to call him bad at this when her situation with Taiju was... It must really be bad.*

She gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Come back when you're ready."

Then she turned and slipped back into the viewing room, leaving Senku alone in the quiet hallway with nothing but his thoughts and the sound of his heart trying to pretend it wasn't beating too fast.

The door creaked softly as it opened.

A few heads turned, but no one said anything. Yuzuriha slipped back inside first, her expression serene and composed, taking her seat beside Taiju like nothing had happened at

all.

Senku followed a few seconds later.

He wasn't fidgeting. Not technically. But there was a stiffness to his shoulders that didn't belong—like he was calculating the angle of every step, like he was *aware* of each person in the room without looking at any of them. Especially not Gen. The couch hadn't moved in his absence. Which was a problem, because Gen was still sitting exactly where Senku had left him—legs crossed, arm draped lazily along the backrest, posture relaxed in that practiced, calculated way he used when he didn't want to pressure someone but was absolutely paying attention.

Senku hesitated.

Only for a second. But in *this* room, with *these* people, that second was loud.

He moved.

Dropped back into his spot beside Gen with a perfectly casual huff. Crossed his arms. Slouched a little. Looked at the screen and *not* at the man next to him.

And Gen, damn him, didn't so much as twitch. He didn't glance over. Didn't smirk. Didn't lean in to whisper some devastatingly perceptive one-liner. He just let the silence breathe, gaze fixed on the TV like he was completely uninterested. Senku hated how grateful he felt for that. He could still feel it though. The quiet invitation. The awareness. Like Gen had given him a buffer—space to recalibrate, to reassemble his emotional shields without the added complication of acknowledgment.

Because of course Gen knew.

He had known the *second* Yuzuriha stood up and guided Senku out.

But he let it go. And in doing so, gave Senku a moment of mercy that very few people would've thought to offer.

Senku shifted in his seat, eyes locked on the glowing screen ahead.

Focus , he told himself. *Recalibrate. Don't think about it. Just watch the damn footage.*

"…Alright," he muttered to himself, rolling his sleeves up. "If she wants proof I'm worth the grant money, I'll give her ten billion percent."

He already had half a list of possible interview questions forming in his mind—and better yet, counter-questions. Senku was used to playing offense. Now it was time to prepare for one hell of a first impression.

Senku didn't sleep.

Not because of nerves—he'd already calculated the likely success rate of the interview based on his qualifications and Dr. Okoye's publication history. The odds were in his favor. But "favorable odds" didn't mean *guaranteed* , and that meant preparation.

Chrome shifted a little where he sat. "So… uh. Interview prep sounds kinda scary, huh?"

Senku didn't answer. He was visibly lost in thought, eyes flicking left and right like he was already fielding imaginary questions in his head.

Ryusui hummed, Senku really was interesting, "That kid really doesn't let himself coast, huh? You'd think getting the interview would buy him at least one hour of smug relaxation."

Francois gave a slight nod. "Unfortunately, that kind of mental velocity is difficult to decelerate. It's better to let it burn itself off… or redirect it."

Ukyo folded his arms. "Redirect how?"

Gen didn’t look away from the screen, but his voice came in smooth, gentle. “With *science* , of course. Or distraction. Preferably both.”

Yuzuriha gave a hopeful smile. “Maybe we could use some of the things he was working on back then. He mentioned a portable vaccine system, right? That sounded incredible!”

Senku, still watching his past self, gave the smallest grunt of acknowledgment. “Cryo-stabilization without reliable electricity. Sub-zero without freezing the active compound. Not impossible. Just annoyingly inefficient. We aren't quiet at that level of science yet, even if it would be useful."

“See?” Yuzuriha chimed again, determined now. “That’s really cool!”

Taiju threw in a bright grin, clearly trying to help. “Yeah! Like, you’re gonna tell us how to keep soup cold in the desert next, right?”

That earned him a side-eye from Senku, but at least it was something. Chrome leaned forward, grinning wide. “Okay but wait—I wanna try building one of those vaccine cooler boxes now. If we can figure that out, we can probably adapt it to food storage or medicine in the Stone World, right?”

Senku exhaled slowly, the slightest tension dropping from his shoulders. “If we did it with local insulation materials and a consistent airflow system—maybe. It’d take some math.”

He pulled up every publicly available lecture Dr. Okoye had ever given, parsing through interviews, conference panels, and academic debates. He read three of her papers at once—one on hemorrhagic fever biomarkers, one on socio-political limitations of field data collection in rural Uganda, and one on a promising counter-viral compound based on a plant only found in specific equatorial zones. By the time it was 2:43 a.m., he had already formulated his top five strategies for impressing her.

The only problem was... his brain wasn't slowing down. Questions circled his head like electrons—What’s the best way to bring up independent research without sounding like

a brat? What field protocols would she expect a teenager to already understand? How do I explain my field plan for water testing in under 30 seconds?

His fingers tapped a steady beat on the desk.

“Damn,” Chrome finally breathed, leaning forward. “That's how you get ready for an interview?”

“No,” Yuzuriha said softly, eyes wide with gentle amazement. “That's how Senku gets ready for an interview.”

Ukyo let out a small breath that might've been a laugh, quietly impressed. “It’s like watching someone cram three weeks of work into three hours.”

Beside him, Kohaku shook her head slightly, amused and baffled in equal measure. “No wonder he acts like he already knows everything. He probably does.”

Gen sat back slowly, eyes narrowing in thoughtful appreciation. “Actually, forget what I said about scheduling the interview too close to prepare.” His gaze slid over to Senku, who stubbornly refused to acknowledge it. “Apparently, that's exactly how Senku prepares best—under maximum pressure, in the middle of the night, ten billion tabs open.”

At 3:04 a.m., he was deep into drafting a reply flowchart when his door creaked open.

He didn’t turn—just registered the faint squeak of socks on the floorboards. Then the quiet clack of a can being set next to his elbow.

Byakuya.

Senku glanced sideways.

It was his favorite kind—grapefruit and caffeine. Nothing fancy. Cheap convenience store stuff that his dad always stocked in the back of the fridge, even when Senku pretended he didn’t care.

“Didn’t say anything because I knew you’d try to argue,” Byakuya said, voice soft in the dark. “So just take it. And don’t burn out before the call, yeah?”

“Aw man,” Chrome said quietly, scrubbing his fingers through his hair. “That's actually pretty sweet.”

Beside Chrome, Ukyo leaned back, crossing his arms with a gentle, amused sigh. “Those were my favorite energy drinks too, actually,” he admitted softly. “Grapefruit flavor. Bitter enough to keep you awake, sweet enough to hide the aftertaste.”

Senku shot him a quick glance—brief, acknowledging—and finally relaxed a little, his shoulders dropping slightly as some of the earlier tension eased from his posture. “Figures you’d go for efficiency, too.”

Ukyo smiled, quiet amusement flickering across his expression. “You and me both.”

Senku huffed lightly, sounding almost like himself again. “Good choice.”

Gen tilted his head, observing carefully with faint relief as Senku settled back into his more familiar persona. “Seems like we’ve located the secret ingredient to Senku’s success. Bitter energy drinks and minimal sleep. Shame we can't get that here."

Senku scoffed quietly, a faint smirk returning to the corner of his mouth. “Damn right. Worked every time.”

Ukyo liked them too huh... Senku hadn't created anything like that, it felt too much like a personal want that was a waste of time, but if Ukyo also liked them perhaps trying to recreate it wouldn't be a waste of time. Similar to the cola, or the cotton candy, never for himself, but if others could benefit as well? Plus, the caffeine was easy enough to get. They had access to that ever since the competition for Ruri's hand in marriage! He'd consider it more later.

Senku gave a tiny snort. “I’m optimizing, not burning out.”

Byakuya chuckled, ruffling Senku’s hair once—quickly, before Senku could duck away.

“Same thing, sometimes,” he said. “Just... be proud of yourself already. You’re doing something big. Whether she says yes or not.”

Senku didn’t answer. He just cracked open the can and took a long drink, eyes never leaving his notes.

Byakuya didn’t need a thank-you. He never did.

And Senku… he had a call to ace.

Watching the moment play out, Senku’s jaw tightened subtly, a flicker of something almost painful passing across his features. It was strange, he realized suddenly—how easily he'd taken moments like that for granted. He’d brushed off gestures of affection as irrelevant distractions, never considering that someday, far too soon, he’d never experience them again. Byakuya had been gone for over 3,600 years now, and Senku couldn’t help but wonder, in a rare, uncomfortable flash of regret, how much it would've cost him just to give his father something genuine back. Something more than silence.

And for a brief, uncomfortable moment, he found himself glancing around at the others—at Chrome, at Ukyo, at Gen. At everyone, really. Was he still doing the same thing, brushing off the gestures he’d regret later? He didn’t want to make the same mistake twice. Not when he had the opportunity, scientifically speaking, to learn from past errors.

A finger reached over and poked him on the cheek. Slim and long, the fingers of a performer - Gen. The Mentalist must have noticed him having some heavier thoughts and wanted to interrupt. Senku had to admit a little ruefully, that he was thankful for it.

The sun was up, but Senku barely noticed.

He had twenty minutes left until the scheduled call with Dr. Ada Okoye. His whiteboard was a mess of interconnected notes—virus transmission vectors, local infrastructure breakdowns, probabilistic model graphs, and a small side panel labeled *Bribery Ratios vs. Field Success Rate.* His laptop screen displayed three windows: one with her CV, one with her published dissertation (which he’d annotated with ruthless efficiency), and one with his compiled answers to likely questions—though he had already committed everything to memory.

Senku straightened in his chair, glanced at the mirror on his desk, and flattened his hair —futile effort. It bounced back immediately. Tch. Whatever.

Beside them, Gen's lips had formed into an exaggerated pout, his eyes narrowed teasingly as he studied the annotated dissertation on-screen. "You mean to say you annotated someone else's dissertation, Senku-chan? And here I thought mine was special."

Senku's eyes flicked briefly toward Gen, catching the mentalist's playful sulk. For just a fraction of a second, his own expression softened, a subtle twitch at the corner of his mouth betraying amusement before he quickly schooled his face back into neutrality.

"You really think I stop at just one?" Senku said dryly. "Don't flatter yourself."

Gen's pout deepened theatrically, but his eyes sparkled with humor.

Yuzuriha, meanwhile, watched Senku closely. Her gaze was gentle, understanding—encouraging. She didn't say anything, but the silent support in her expression was unmistakable, as if quietly reminding him of their earlier conversation, nudging him toward openness rather than hiding behind dismissive sarcasm.

Senku exhaled slowly, as if acknowledging her silent prompt, and relaxed just a fraction more, his expression becoming slightly less guarded.

He clicked into the call one minute early.

It rang twice before the window shifted.

Dr. Ada Okoye appeared, dark-skinned and sharp-eyed, her hair wrapped in a navy scarf patterned with constellations. She wore no makeup, a practical lab coat, and a look that said *she had already read his entire application twice.*

"Senku Ishigami," she greeted, folding her hands under her chin. "Fifteen. Already published in two journals. Top percentile in every category. And somehow managed to sneak in a grant application without raising eyebrows from your school system. You're either a genius or a very confident fraud."

"Can't it be both?" Senku said easily.

She barked out a laugh. "I like that."

“Magnificent!” he announced loudly, eyes alight with admiration. “She’s brilliant, confident—and absolutely gorgeous. A mind like that makes her even more beautiful! Truly, all people are beautiful!”

Senku recoiled visibly, a look of pure disgust crossing his face as a single thought flashed uncomfortably through his mind: *Ugh, it’s like watching him flirt with my dead mom.* Out loud, he just grimaced sharply, cutting Ryusui off. “Ugh—no. Stop. Ten billion percent revolting.”

Ryusui blinked, momentarily startled. “Ah—my apologies, Senku! I meant only admiration!”

Gen, thoroughly amused by Senku’s reaction, hid his smile behind one hand. “You really should work on your timing, our dearest capitalist.”

Chrome laughed awkwardly, eyes flicking uncertainly between them. “Yeah…maybe a little too enthusiastic this time.”

Yuzuriha gave Senku a sympathetic glance, fighting a small grin. Kohaku just shook her head, looking amused, while Ukyo sighed softly, clearly suppressing laughter.

He was already calculating. A disarming line from her meant she was testing charm. That ruled out strict academic grilling—she wanted problem-solving. Good. He was better at that anyway.

“Alright, then. Let’s cut to it. Why Ebola?”

Senku didn’t miss a beat. “High mortality, high mutation rate, low global funding. Of the known Class A pathogens, it has some of the worst infrastructure response worldwide. That means gaps in the data. Gaps I want to close.”

Ada raised an eyebrow. “Ambitious. You don’t think the other 100 people applying for this internship said the same thing?”

François nodded thoughtfully, watching the exchange with quiet approval. “She isn’t wrong. When hiring for positions at the company, I found most applicants misunderstood the basic principle: it’s not the employer's job to discover your worth—you must actively prove it. Too many people simply repeat what they think their interviewer wants to hear without considering the sheer number of others who’ve done the exact same thing.”

Gen tilted his head, smiling faintly in agreement. “Especially in academia, interviewers expect applicants to differentiate themselves clearly. The key is offering something truly memorable—unique experiences, unconventional problem-solving methods, or personal research you’ve pursued beyond the standard curriculum. Impressing her with statistics alone wouldn’t be enough.” His gaze flicked briefly to Senku, gently teasing, “Good thing our Senku-chan has never settled for 'good enough.'”

Senku grinned wide, remembering what he followed up with.

> “Maybe,” Senku said, “But I doubt any of them submitted a hypothetical water sanitation plan modeled off the exact mineral content of Uganda’s Lake Albert region.”
>
> He clicked a tab. The shared screen popped up. A full schematic appeared—filtration steps, boiling methods, ash-based pH adjustments, and UV exposure projections using locally sourced materials.
>
> Dr. Okoye leaned forward.
>
> “I built the plan off a revised version of your 2016 thesis,” Senku added. “The one where you proposed shifting community-centered sanitation to mobile water testing for microbe load.”
>
> “You read that?” she asked, a little surprised. “It’s not even publicly linked.”
>
> “You cited it in an interview two years ago and I found the source ID. The database wasn’t hard to crack.”
>
> That made her go still for a second. Then—another laugh. Bigger, louder.
>
> “God. You’re an absolute menace.”

Taiju suddenly slapped a hand onto Senku’s shoulder, beaming so brightly it was almost blinding.

“Senku!” Taiju roared, practically vibrating with pride. “You’re amazing, man! Even back then you were going a million percent—no, ten billion percent beyond what anyone else would!”

Senku flinched at the sheer volume of Taiju’s enthusiasm, but his expression relaxed into mild amusement despite himself. “Too loud, you big oaf. I was just covering all the angles.”

“Yeah, well you covered them like crazy!” Taiju’s voice didn't lower at all, though his grin softened into something earnest and sincere. “Seriously, though, Senku. She was right—you really are kind of a menace!”

Senku snorted quietly, shoulders finally fully relaxing beneath Taiju’s broad, familiar grip. “I’ll take it as a compliment coming from you.”

“You should!” Taiju declared, nodding firmly, voice somehow even louder. “A menace for science! Man, she must’ve really loved that about you!”

“Yeah,” Senku said after a pause, quieter this time, glancing briefly away. “Guess she did.”

Senku smirked.

“I’m not even halfway through my questions,” she said, but her tone had shifted. “You already know the answers, don’t you?”

“I’d rather talk about your previous field methods,” Senku said, polite but pointed. “You mentioned in your paper on rural viral response that social engineering was sometimes more valuable than direct scientific explanation. I think that could apply even now, especially with the stigma surrounding Ebola transmission—”

Ada raised a hand, cutting him off. “Stop.”

Senku blinked. “Huh?”

Ukyo tilted his head, looking quietly amused. “It seems even Senku didn't expect that.”

Gen’s eyebrows lifted slowly in surprise, his lips tugging into a delighted smirk. “My, my—I don’t think I’ve seen our dear scientist so genuinely shocked since the day Taiju handed over the revival fluid directly to Tsukasa without a care in the world.”

Senku scowled lightly, shooting Gen a pointed look. “Not sure that memory needed dredging up, mentalist.”

Gen shrugged innocently. “Merely noting historical facts.”

Yuzuriha hid a soft laugh behind her hand, eyes sparkling gently at Senku’s embarrassment. She caught Senku’s eye, sending a silent encouragement. He sighed quietly, rolling his shoulders and focusing back on the screen. Senu had never thought he would be on this side of friendship. It felt so weird, someone encouraging him for some sort of potential romantic overture that Senku had clearly stated that he didn't want. Still, she wasn't wrong. Acting awkward about it wasn't helping anything. No matter what, him and Gen would be friends. They were going to hell together, they shared the mental weight together, a little bit of flirting between friends wouldn't change that if it happened again.

> “I’m not wasting time pretending this is still a screening,” she said bluntly. “You’re in. Consider this your formal acceptance, Senku Ishigami. Your brain’s too good to leave on standby.”
>
> For the first time in the last thirty hours, Senku’s expression cracked. Not much—but his mouth twitched. Just slightly.
>
> “...You’re serious?”
>
> “Completely. Your paperwork was solid. Your planning is terrifying. And if you're willing to risk 110-degree heat and days without decent wi-fi to help fight a hemorrhagic virus?” She smiled, sharp and impressed. “Then you’re exactly the kind of chaos we need.”

Chrome threw his fists up, practically leaping out of his seat. “Heck yeah! Senku nailed it!”

Kohaku smiled fiercely, nodding once in approval. “Exactly what he deserves. She’s smart enough to recognize someone with a sharp will when she sees one.”

Ryusui leaned forward, eyes shining brightly. “Magnificent! Ada’s decisiveness is truly beautiful! And Senku’s earned nothing less!”

Ukyo’s eyebrows lifted appreciatively. “Seeing Senku actually surprised? That might be the most impressive part of this entire interview.”

Gen smirked softly, watching Senku closely. Needing to test, to see what had changed, “Indeed. It’s charming, isn't it—seeing our scientist actually stunned into silence for once.”

Senku rolled his eyes, though there was warmth in the gesture now. Yuzuriha hadn't lead him wrong before, and it was easier than Senku expected to relax into the Mentalists words and tease back, “Shut up.”

Senku straightened in his chair. “Ten billion percent.”

“You’ll get your official documentation and travel schedule by the end of the week. Be ready.”

The call ended.

Senku stared at the blank screen for a few seconds. Then:

“…Tch. Guess I better start packing.”

François, however, was already looking thoughtful, glancing between Senku and the screen. “A week’s turnaround is quite aggressive, logistically speaking. Visas, medical clearances, vaccinations—not to mention transportation arrangements. She must’ve been extraordinarily confident to expedite everything so quickly.”

Senku shrugged lightly, regaining some of his casual confidence. “She knew exactly what she wanted. Efficiency isn’t just *my* thing. Ada had it by the bucket loads."

François’s eyes softened slightly in respectful acknowledgment. “Clearly.”

Taiju laughed heartily, oblivious to the logistical complexities. “Ha! Sounds perfect for Senku—he loves doing impossible stuff!”

From behind him, the door creaked open again.

“Was that what it sounded like?” Byakuya asked, still holding a second can of grapefruit soda and looking like he hadn’t dared breathe during the last ten minutes. Senku spun around, arms crossing like he was trying to pretend this wasn’t a big deal. Even he couldn't resist the huge grin that was spread across his face. It lit him up, made him look like the 15 year old that he actually was for once.

“Yeah,” he muttered. “I’m in.”

Byakuya whooped.

Then he hugged Senku. Hard. Senku didn't try and dodge.

Senku groaned. “Ugh, damn old man—calm down, I haven’t even left yet—”

“Genius!” Byakuya yelled, beaming. “My son’s gonna go fight Ebola!”

“Don’t say it like that,” Senku muttered, but his ears were red. “It’s just a research internship.”

Chrome’s grin widened impossibly further. “Aw, heck yeah! Byakuya’s the best!”

Beside him, Taiju laughed loudly, practically vibrating with excitement. “Look at that smile! Senku, man, you’re seriously the coolest!”

“It’s rare to see Senku look that genuinely happy,” Ukyo added warmly, leaning back with crossed arms and an appreciative smile.

Yuzuriha glanced softly at Senku, eyes sparkling with gentle affection. “Your dad was really proud of you. And for good reason.”

Across from her, Gen’s expression softened thoughtfully. His voice was low, genuine, carrying a gentle tease beneath the sincerity. “He was right to be proud. But Senku-chan—”

Gen paused, lips curving into a knowing smirk, “—you're allowed to enjoy being praised, you know.”

Senku scoffed lightly, turning his face slightly away, ears suspiciously pink even now. “Tch. Shut up.”

Ryusui’s laughter filled the silence immediately after, bright and infectious. “Why hide it, Senku? Passion is meant to be shown! Celebrate!”

The airport was loud. Too many people, too many announcements, too many lights flickering on boards overhead—but Senku tuned most of it out.

He stood near the departure gate with one carry-on bag at his feet and a thick folder of medical documents and clearance tucked under one arm. His passport was already out, and he had double-checked the contents of his travel pouch five times since walking through the door. Everything was in place.

And yet, his foot wouldn’t stop tapping.

“You’ll text us when you land, right?” Yuzuriha asked for the third time, her hands wringing the hem of her shirt as she stood beside him.

“Satellite phone,” Senku replied, adjusting the strap on his bag. “Wi-fi will be unreliable at best. But yeah. I’ll check in.”

Chrome tilted his head curiously, frowning a little. “Hold on—Wi-Fi? I’ve heard you modern guys toss that word around, but what exactly is it?”

Senku glanced over, shoulders relaxing slightly as he slipped back into familiar scientific territory. “It’s a way of connecting devices—like phones or computers—to the internet wirelessly within a small area. Basically, there's a transmitter nearby that sends out radio signals. Your device picks those up and connects to it, and then that transmitter’s usually wired into the broader internet through cables or satellite links. It lets your small device communicate with computers all around the world.”

Chrome's eyes widened a little in understanding. “Oh, I get it! So Wi-Fi’s like... a tiny bridge from your phone to the bigger network. Kind of like how our cellphones needed towers, but smaller scale?”

“Exactly,” Senku said, smirking slightly. “And out in remote areas like where I was headed, they usually don’t have those transmitters or cables in place. Hence the satellite phone.”

“I looked up the region,” She added, “And there’s a lot of natural beauty. Lakes, birds, all sorts of medicinal plants. Take pictures if you can?”

Senku blinked. “Tch. What am I, a tourist?”

She laughed, nudging his arm. “No, but I’d still like to see it through your eyes.”

“Fine. If I find anything ten billion percent cool, I’ll document it.”

A few feet away, Taiju was trying to look calm. He wasn’t doing a very good job.

“I packed snacks!” he burst out suddenly, holding out a bag like it was a peace offering. “You can’t just eat whatever they have over there, right? I mean, you probably could, but what if you don’t like it?! So I got you dried fruit and those protein bars you eat when you don’t sleep—”

Senku gave him a look but still took the bag. “Thanks, big oaf.”

"Well, she clearly tried to play into your love of science to get pictures," Gen remarked lightly, amused. "Did it end up working?" He knew the answer was almost certainly no—Senku really wasn't the type—but Yuziriha's attempt had been clever. Maybe she'd gotten lucky.

Yuzuriha gave a fond giggle. "He did send one picture of a stick bug, though. I think the caption was something like, ‘Look at how cool evolution is.’"

Gen sighed dramatically, shaking his head with mock despair. "Ah, that's our Senku-chan."

Senku scoffed sharply. "You clearly don't appreciate how badass stick-bug evolution is, so allow me to educate you—"

"Oh no…" Gen rolled his eyes, leaning back theatrically. Beside him, however, Chrome leaned forward eagerly, eyes sparkling in anticipation.

Senku smirked, launching effortlessly into explanation mode. "The stick bug evolved specifically to avoid being eaten by predators—its body shape, color, even its movements are adapted to mimic twigs and branches. Predators literally overlook them because they look exactly like part of their environment. Natural selection took camouflage to an extreme, refining their disguise over millions of generations until it became damn near perfect."

Chrome nodded vigorously, clearly impressed. "That's incredible! So it survived by becoming almost invisible?"

"Exactly," Senku confirmed, grinning now. "Evolution isn't just powerful—it's elegant."

He paused abruptly, suddenly aware of the phrase he'd just used. *Elegant.* That had been Xeno's word—his old mentor's habitual descriptor whenever scientific concepts impressed him. Senku's smirk softened, just slightly, into something quieter, more complicated. It felt strange to catch himself echoing the man after so many years. Even now, he could practically hear Xeno's voice in the back of his mind, patiently reminding him that true science wasn't merely effective; it was always elegant, always beautifully refined.

Gen tilted his head, noting Senku's sudden quiet with interest. "Something wrong, Senku-chan?"

Senku blinked, pulled swiftly from his thoughts, and shook his head lightly. "Nah. Just remembered something, that's all."

Gen didn't press further, but his gaze lingered thoughtfully.

"You're really going, huh," Taiju muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "This is, like… way farther than science camp."

"Yeah," Senku said, not unkindly. "It's kind of the point."

Byakuya stepped forward then, hands jammed in his jacket pockets. He didn't say anything for a moment. Just looked at his son—the same way he always had, with that

blend of impossible pride and quiet awe, like Senku was the answer to every question he'd ever had.

"You've got your gear?" he asked finally, clearing his throat.

Senku nodded. "Test kits, solar charger, distilled samples, everything."

"Extra charger."

"Packed it."

"Emergency water filtration straws?"

Senku raised an eyebrow. "Who do you think invented half of what I'm bringing?"

"I know that water filtration straws were a thing before you were in the science field, Senku. I worked with the company that held a copyright for them." Ryusui sounded thoughtful before his expression broke into an eager grin. "Did you improve them for yourself?"

Senku cackled, completely unrepentant about ripping through the copyright on that particular technology. "Ten billion percent! Not my fault the ones they created were ineffective."

"Solar panels too?" Ryusui pressed eagerly, excitement growing visibly as possibilities flooded his mind. He needed Senku when they finally restored civilization—the scientist was practically a goldmine of profitable improvements on critical tech. "Tell me you worked on solar panels."

"Obviously," Senku said easily, smirking. "Managed to boost efficiency a bit—nothing massive, just enough to optimize output with fewer resources. Improved the coating and tweaked the internal grid structure for less loss."

Ryusui laughed triumphantly, practically vibrating with enthusiasm. "Magnificent! Imagine the scalability! Wind turbines next?"

Senku shrugged casually, clearly enjoying himself despite his usual nonchalant front. "Tweaked the blade designs slightly—picked up another five to seven percent efficiency on average. Not groundbreaking, but worth the effort."

Ryusui laughed triumphantly, practically vibrating with enthusiasm. "Marvelous! Imagine the scalability! Senku, once we've got society back on its feet, you and I are going to corner the market on green energy tech! This world will run cleaner and smarter—and we'll make billions!"

Senku rolled his eyes, though his smirk was genuine, clearly satisfied. "Knock yourself out, but I could've sworn I said I wasn't gonna work for any company."

"You did say that," Ryusui admitted, grinning widely and without shame. "But then you froze when I mentioned the funding. You aren't fooling me, Senku!"

Said scientist rolled his eyes again but didn't complain further. After all, if Ryusui wanted to focus on green energy once they restored civilization, it might help soothe the nagging guilt Senku was already feeling about reintroducing pollution into a world that had finally recovered from humanity's mess once before.

His thoughts briefly flickered toward another green-energy tech he remembered—the pressure plates embedded in sidewalks that generated electricity as people walked over them. Piezoelectric Sidewalks. Laurence Kemball-Cook made a hell of an idea that was for sure. He'd read about the creator's initial designs years ago—decent concept, but the output was frustratingly small. Maybe if he adjusted the materials or switched out the—

The TV flickered suddenly, pulling Senku's attention back as the screen came to life again. He blinked, reluctantly shelving the mental blueprint he'd just started constructing.

Byakuya huffed a laugh. "Right. Dumb question."

There was a beat of silence.

Then Byakuya stepped forward and pulled Senku into a brief, tight hug.

"You're doing something incredible, Senku."

Yuzuriha blinked rapidly, her smile warm and a little wobbly at the edges. “He is, though,” she said softly, hands folded in her lap. “Even now, everything he’s building—it's helping people. He’s still doing good things with science, just like Byakuya hoped he would.”

Senku didn’t look away from the screen, but his shoulders shifted almost imperceptibly. It really was good to hear the old man again, see his face, in ways that he wasn't able to before. After all, at this point on the screen Senku had been pulled into a hug, so he didn't get to see what the current Senku was seeing, the teary eyes full of pride that Byakuya hid behind Senku's back.

She glanced at him, then added with quiet certainty, “He’d be proud of you. I think he already was.”

> Senku’s hands stayed awkwardly at his sides. “You’re acting like I'm leaving to save the world. I'm a research assistant.”
>
> “You might,” Byakuya said, smiling as he pulled back. “Wouldn’t surprise me.”
>
> “Tch. Overdramatic old man.”

Gen let out a low whistle. “Oof. That aged *eerily* well.” He leaned back, folding his arms as if trying to play it cool, but his eyes stayed on Senku with a sharpness that gave him away. “Almost like the man had a sixth sense for prophetic goodbyes.”

Yuzuriha smiled faintly, her voice gentle. “He really believed in you, Senku. And… he was right. You *are* saving the world.”

Senku made a scoffing sound, but he didn’t try to counter it this time.

Saving the world, huh? The phrase didn't sit quite right. He wasn't some hero out of a comic book, running into danger with noble ideals and a shining heart. He wasn't doing this because it was righteous. He was doing it because someone had to. Because if they didn't push forward, they'd slide back into the dark. And that was unacceptable.

It wasn't about saving the world—it was about *restarting* it. One circuit, one formula, one stubbornly fought-for inch at a time.

If people were calling that "saving the world," fine. He'd let them.

But for him, it had always just been about one thing: science wins.

And if that was enough to make Byakuya proud, then maybe—*just maybe*—

Kohaku tilted her head. It was hard to find the chance to tease Senku, so she wouldn't turn it down, "I don't know. It still sounds like a ridiculous thing to say about someone who can barely sleep through the night without muttering formulas."

Taiju laughed uproaringly, "So he *does* do that? I thought I imagined it!"

"Focus," Ukyo murmured, though he was smiling too. "That part—Byakuya's faith in him—it was solid. Even back then."

The final boarding call echoed over the loudspeakers. Flight 764 to Entebbe. Last call.

Senku turned to his friends. "Guess that's me."

"Kick viral butt, genius," Taiju said, his voice thick.

"Take notes on everything," Yuzuriha added with a watery smile.

Senku gave them a salute, turned, and strode toward the gate.

He didn't look back.

The screen shifted, and a sleek, silver plane came into view, slicing across a clear blue sky.

Chrome shot to his feet. “WHOA! *What is THAT? I know we saw one earlier but it was crashing this one is going like crazy!"* His eyes were huge, mouth hanging open as he pointed at the jet. “That thing’s flying! Like actually flying! In the air! Without wings like a bird! That’s—how is that—?!”

Senku’s head snapped up, a grin already tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Heh. Welcome to the magic of physics, caveman.”

Chrome spun to him, practically vibrating. “Tell me how it works! No way something that heavy should be in the sky!”

“Oh, it *shouldn’t* be,” Senku said, now fully energized. “But that’s the beauty of it. It stays up because of **lift**—air moves faster over the curved top of the wing than the flat bottom, which creates a pressure difference. More pressure below pushes the plane up.”

Chrome’s jaw dropped. “So the *air* is what’s holding it up? Just because of how the wing’s shaped?!”

“Exactly. That’s Bernoulli’s principle,” Senku said, eyes lighting up. “Then you’ve got **thrust**—the engines force it forward, which keeps air flowing over the wings and keeps the lift going. Thrust beats drag, lift beats gravity, and the whole thing balances out like a flying math equation.”

Chrome stared at the jet in wonder. “That’s insane. It’s like… like a sky boat that *science* keeps up!”

Gen chuckled from the side. “Careful, he’s going to try building one next.”

Senku barked a laugh. “Let him. I’d pay good money to see what kind of disaster that first prototype turns into.”

Chrome’s eyes gleamed. “Challenge accepted.”

The heat hit him like a wall the second he stepped off the plane.

Not just heat— *wet* heat. The kind that wrapped around you like it had intent. Heavy, humid air pushed in around his collar, stuck to his neck, soaked instantly into the material of his shirt. The sun hadn’t even fully risen yet, but the air *buzzed* , and it wasn’t from electricity.

Senku adjusted the strap on his bag and stepped down onto the tarmac at Entebbe Airport, heart thudding—not from nerves, but from sheer anticipation. New climate. New biome. New unknowns. Ten billion percent what he signed up for. The airport was smaller than he expected, but efficient. Customs was slow, though—some strange mix of laid-back pace and tight-eyed vigilance. He caught eyes glancing toward him now and then, probably because he didn’t look like he belonged. A teenager with research clearance and a work visa. They double-checked his paperwork three times.

A wave of heat shimmered across the image—moist, golden, and almost tangible. The hazy morning light spilled over the tarmac at Entebbe Airport, casting long shadows as Senku stepped off the plane.

Kohaku leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowing. “Is that… steam? No—it’s just the *air*? It looks thick.”

“Yup,” Gen murmured. “Tropical humidity. You can almost *feel* it through the screen.”

Chrome’s jaw was slack. “That’s Africa? It’s nothing like I pictured—look at the sky! And the plants—those trees don’t look like anything we’ve got around here.”

“It’s a completely different biome,” Senku said, arms crossed but clearly keyed in. “Closer to the equator, high elevation, lake air nearby—you get these insane temperature and moisture combinations. Every step outside feels like you’re walking into a sauna.”

He shifted slightly, voice picking up with that familiar edge of scientific enthusiasm. “People think of Africa like it’s all one environment, but that’s total garbage. The continent’s massive—bigger than most maps even show. You’ve got rainforests, deserts, highlands, coastal plains, savannas—some regions even drop below freezing depending on the elevation. You can travel a thousand kilometers and be in a completely different climate system.”

Taiju fanned himself instinctively just looking at the scene, “It looks so hot already! And that’s morning?!”

Ukyo nodded quietly, taking in the unfamiliar landscape. “The air even sounds different… There’s a buzz. Like it’s alive.”

Yuzuriha’s gaze lingered on the screen. “So this is where you went? All by yourself? I can’t imagine what that felt like.” She paused, her expression softening. “If it had been me… I think I would’ve been scared. Not just because it’s far, but because everything would be unfamiliar. The language, the smells, the way the air feels on your skin—like you’re not just far from home, but in a completely different world. I’d probably spend the first week just trying not to get lost. I think I’d miss everyone a lot more than I’d expect. And I’d wonder if I really belonged there.”

Senku gave a small shrug. “Didn’t matter to much to me. Everything was new. I didn’t care about the heat or the stares. My brain was too busy cataloguing plants, soil composition, solar angles…”

Chrome grinned, energized again. “Man, I want to go there someday. Learn about all the stuff they’ve got that we’ve never even seen!”

Senku turned to him with a sharp, almost mischievous glint in his eye. “*Well, duh.* Why do you think we’re building that boat, caveman? This is our *age of discovery,* Chrome. We’re not just reviving civilization—we’re taking it global. Every new continent, every new biome. That’s all on the table.”

He smirked, and for a second, he looked like the kid version of himself on the screen again—standing on foreign soil with fire in his chest and equations in his veins.

"Get excited. Because we're gonna *see it all.* Ten billion percent."

Chrome's grin stretched wide. "Hell yeah we are!"

"I'm with the joint Ebola surveillance program," Senku told them, gesturing to the letter in his folder. "Professor Ada Okoye signed off on it. Kampala campus."

Eventually, they waved him through.

A short, aging driver with a greying beard was waiting with a small hand-painted sign that read: *ISHIGAMI – VIROLOGY INSTITUTE* . No uniform, no badge—just a quiet nod as Senku approached and handed him a sealed envelope.

"Professor says you'll be briefed tomorrow. Today is to settle in." His English was accented but clear. "We take you to housing now."

Senku nodded. "Understood."

They drove along the edge of Lake Victoria for almost an hour before turning into the outskirts of Kampala. The road was chaotic—half-paved, half-dirt, crowded with foot traffic and the occasional motorbike cutting a sharp curve through traffic like it owed them money. It was loud, vivid, *real* . Senku kept the window cracked despite the dust. He wanted to smell everything. There was something like roasting corn in the air, something acrid—maybe burning plastic—and something else, something *organic* he couldn't quite place. The dust clung to his skin even inside the car. He didn't care.

"Whoa," Chrome whispered. "Is it just me, or does Senku kinda look... happy?"

"No," Ukyo murmured. "Not just happy. *Hooked.*"

"It's the eyes," Gen added, voice low with sudden amusement. "That's the look of love, right there. First time I've seen that look directed at something other then the stars."

Taiju blinked. “What?! Love?! With what? I always knew it would happen one day!”

The scientist in question shot his oldest friend a short look.

“With *everything,* apparently,” Gen said, gesturing loosely at the screen. “That dust, the food smells, the noise, the mess—he’s completely enchanted.”

Kohaku raised an eyebrow, watching closely. “That’s how he looked the first time he saw a functioning gear system again.”

Senku, sitting among them now, crossed his arms like he was trying to shut down the conversation preemptively—but didn’t offer a single denial.

Instead, his eyes lingered on the screen longer than he meant to.

It *had* been different.

The air had smelled like fire and earth. People moved with urgency, not just for efficiency but because things *mattered*. Every part of the day felt grounded—real, imperfect, alive. He remembered the way traffic twisted like chaos, but somehow worked. How meals weren’t about luxury, just necessity and warmth. How every conversation—whether technical or personal—held weight. Nothing wasted. Nothing performative. Just *living*.

He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed that until now.

And strangely, watching it now, he could see it in the Stone World too. The dust. The stripped-down systems. The sharp edge of survival. It wasn’t the same, not exactly—but it echoed. Raw and honest, unpolished by convenience or pretense. Maybe that was why he’d adapted so quickly back then. Maybe that’s why he’d never really wanted to go back to the old world in the first place.

Senku blinked, catching himself before the silence stretched too long.

They passed street vendors with buckets of fresh chapati and grilled meat, children running barefoot with sloshing plastic water bottles, women balancing entire crates of bananas on their heads like it was nothing.

None of this felt familiar.

And that was perfect.

Kohaku leaned forward slightly, her eyes locked on the women walking with effortless grace through the chaos. “That takes serious skill. Balance, posture, strength—it’s not easy to carry that kind of weight like it’s nothing.”

Yuzuriha smiled softly, her voice thoughtful. “They all look so natural, like they’ve done it a thousand times. It’s kind of beautiful, actually.”

Ryusui gave a low whistle. “Grace and efficiency. I admire it. That’s the kind of poise you can’t fake.”

Ukyo tilted his head, watching the screen with quiet appreciation. “And no wasted movement. It’s all so... integrated into the flow of daily life.”

Senku remained quiet, but a small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. The moment on-screen wasn’t grand or revolutionary—it was just life. Different from what they’d known, but no less real. He remembered being struck by that, even then. Every step, every sound, every smell—it grounded you. Reminded you how big the world really was.

His housing wasn’t a luxury apartment. It was a bunk in a shared concrete building inside a small fenced compound—one room with two beds, a solar lamp overhead, and a rickety desk covered in photocopied safety protocols.

A packet of papers was waiting for him, neatly labeled.

TO: SENKU ISHIGAMI
FROM: DR. A. OKOYE
RE: Orientation & Assignment

Welcome to Uganda. Be at the Institute field office in Mulago by 0700 sharp. No exceptions. No excuses. You'll be joining a rotating field team and will be expected to observe basic safety protocols for biosafety level 3. If you're late, I'll know. Don't be.

P.S. There's a bucket under the sink. If your stomach gives out at the end of the day, aim for that. It happens to newbies at least once this week. Hydrate anyway.

Senku grinned.

So she had a sense of humor. Dark. Dry. *Functional* .

Chrome blinked at the screen, eyebrows raised. "She tells you where to puke? Is that just a normal part of the job?"

"Oh, it is," Gen said with a little shiver. "That's classic black humor in high-pressure fields. Keeps people from falling apart. She's setting the tone."

He leaned forward slightly, fingers steepled with casual precision. "See, the moment you acknowledge the worst-case scenario in a deadpan joke, it stops being some unspoken horror hanging in the air. Instead, it becomes manageable. Predictable. You can *laugh* at it. That's how you hold your nerve in a job where failure isn't just awkward—it's lethal."

Chrome blinked like his eyes were spinning with ideas, "So it's like… psychological shielding?"

Gen smiled. "Exactly. A verbal pressure valve. The best professionals do it without even thinking. She's telling him, 'This job might make you sick, but you'll deal with it—and you won't be the first.'"

Taiju blinked a few times, clearly baffled. "Wait—did she actually write about puking in a *welcome packet*? That's fine, I guess, but she clearly doesn't know Senku very well. That wouldn't happen!" He laughed with total confidence, like it was a fact of nature. "Come on, it's Senku!"

Senku snorted. “Ten billion percent correct, Big Oaf. Best orientation letter I’ve ever gotten.”

Gen tilted his head, eyes narrowing slightly as he studied the way Senku’s mouth curled at the corners. “You really liked her, didn’t you?”

Senku didn’t answer right away. He leaned back slightly, arms crossing, the grin still on his face—less sharp now, more grounded.

“Yeah,” he said after a beat. “She got it. She was the real deal, through and through.”

He dropped his bag onto the empty bunk, sat down, and pulled his notepad from the folder. He scribbled a few notes, already beginning to process the sights, the local resources, the climate implications for viral degradation, and how the local microbial cultures might interact with regional water filtration systems. A small part of him buzzed at the possibilities.

This wasn’t school. This wasn’t theory. This was *it* .

The field. Real science. Real danger. He felt a thrill creep under his skin like a live wire. He climbed into the bunk, propping himself against the wall with his tablet open, reviewing virology case studies he had already read six times before the flight. His body was sticky, tired, disoriented—but his mind was sharp. The fan overhead clunked to life. Somewhere outside, a dog barked. In the distance, he could hear what might’ve been drumming, or traffic, or maybe both.

Senku closed his eyes.

Tomorrow, he would meet Dr. Okoye.

Tomorrow, the real work began.

Kohaku let out a quiet laugh, arms loosely folded. “It’s kind of cute, seeing him that excited.”

Chrome blinked. “Huh? Cute?”

“Not like that,” she clarified quickly, still smiling. “I just mean—look at him. He’s exhausted and probably dehydrated, and his first instinct is to start working. Like a little kid seeing their first sword and wanting to swing it right away.”

Senku arrived at the Institute field office fifteen minutes early.

It wasn’t out of nervousness—just habit. He wasn’t the type to oversleep, and if he was going to spend the day surrounded by viral samples, field equipment, and new human variables, he was going to be alert for every second of it.

The compound in Mulago was busier than he expected. A long cement building lined with mesh-covered windows and a few satellite dishes patched to the roof sat at the far end. Beside it: a rusted shipping container converted into storage and what looked like a portable solar generator. A water tank clung to one corner like a steel tumor, and a folding table out front was already stacked with bottled water and biohazard labels.

A woman in navy scrubs stood just outside, clipboard in hand, barking into a phone in clipped Swahili.

Chrome’s jaw dropped. “Wait, *that’s* the setup?! That’s the whole building?”

“I think we have a sturdier lab in the *Stone World,*” Gen said dryly, one brow raised.

Even Ukyo looked faintly surprised. “I figured it’d be more… modern. This looks like a patched-up utility shed.”

Kohaku tilted her head. “They’re working with limited resources, aren’t they? But still—handling deadly sickness in *that*?”

Meanwhile, Senku said nothing. He was watching the screen like it was showing a sunrise. His younger self stood still, scanning the facility with sharp eyes and a flicker of something like quiet awe. And present-day Senku mirrored the expression almost unconsciously—arms folded, gaze a little distant, but soft. He remembered the solar generator. The water tank. The rusted hinges and duct-taped storage labels. And he remembered loving it.

It wasn’t polished. It wasn’t advanced.

But it worked. It was functional.

Gen glanced sideways at him and caught the look, shaking his head fondly.

She didn't look up when Senku approached.

Not until he said, "Dr. Okoye?"

Then she turned. She was taller than he expected, built like someone who knew how to throw a punch but didn't waste time doing it. Her skin was deep brown and sun-worn, her dark hair buzzed close to the scalp. Her eyes were the most dangerous part—sharp, tired, and unimpressed.

"You're the kid," she said flatly.

François gave a quiet hum, eyebrows raised with something between approval and sympathy. "Ah. A warm welcome, indeed."

Gen chuckled under his breath. "It's the classic 'test your confidence' opener. She doesn't offer trust—you have to earn it."

"Which is fair," Ukyo added. "Especially in a field where one weak link can get people killed."

Gen laced his fingers together, voice turning a little more thoughtful. "People underestimate how powerful first words can be. In psych, we call it a *dominance test*—you say something flat, maybe even dismissive, and you see how the other person reacts. If they hesitate, you know exactly where they stand. If they don't… you pay attention." He leaned back, smiling faintly. "I use the same thing in stage work, actually. You don't win over a crowd by asking for permission. You start bold. Confident. You make them wonder if *they* should be keeping up with *you.* The second you ask for approval, you've already lost control of the room."

Senku sucked in a quiet breath, only just aware of Yuzuriha glancing his way.

Gen explaining psychological frameworks like that was—well, *compelling.* Senku couldn't deny that. His brain itched to break it down, to categorize it, to map the parallels between social dynamics and scientific inquiry. It made sense. Predictable variables. Pattern recognition. Cause and effect. Yuzuriha had gently suggested once that resisting it too hard wasn't helping him. And he had to admit—she wasn't wrong. Fighting the distraction had only made it worse. Acting on it? *Out of the question.* But ignoring it entirely had clearly backfired too.

Fine. He could redirect.

He'd had a functioning working relationship with Xeno during *that* phase—despite everything. He could do the same here. With Gen, it just required recalibration. Yuzuriha had a point—flirting between friends wasn't necessarily catastrophic. With Taiju, never. With Tsukasa… well, that look on his face after the "flirting" comment had been almost worth the detour. Hyoga had looked even more thrown when he'd half-joked about it sounding like a confession. That had been *objectively funny.*

Senku took another breath and re-centered himself.

He could do this.

> Senku raised an eyebrow, he wasn't exactly the best at social interactions, so he wouldn't really bother trying, "You're the doctor who's running this operation in a converted storage unit."
>
> She blinked once.
>
> Then grinned, wide and wolfish. "Good. I hate ass-kissers. Let's go."

Kohaku let out a low whistle, arms crossing. "I see where he gets it now."

Chrome glanced over. "Gets what?"

"That blunt personality," she said plainly. "His whole 'my type of girl is ones that can pump lots of oxygen' thing? Yeah. Definitely *not* from Byakuya."

> Inside, the office was cramped but efficient—lab benches, microscopes, racks of blood samples, notebooks organized with painstaking precision. A whiteboard scrawled with timelines and gene sequences dominated one wall. A laptop hummed in the corner next to a fan trying—and failing—to keep the room cool.
>
> "You're not here to make coffee or play intern," Dr. Okoye said, tossing him a sealed N95 mask and a pair of gloves. "You're here because I read your papers and want to see how your brain works under pressure."
>
> Senku caught the gear with ease. "Understood."
>
> "Good. Field days start at six. Lab days start at five. Don't be late. You have field clearance, but if you pass out, throw up, or screw around, I'll send you back to Japan with your visa shredded."
>
> "Noted."

Taiju stared at the screen, eyes wide. "Whoa—she's scary."

"Scary?" Gen echoed with a grin. "She's fantastic. Honestly, I think I'm in love."

"*Professional* love," Yuzuriha corrected gently, though her smile was half-concerned as she glanced at Senku.

He raised an eyebrow at her, completely unbothered. Ten billion percent not the kind of comment that would faze him. Even if it would have, the woman was long dead. And considering they'd just *agreed* that she and Senku were cut from the same cloth, it would've felt more like narcissism than jealousy anyway.

"Of course," Gen continued breezily, "But you have to admire her style. No sugar, no padding—just expectations and results."

Chrome looked halfway between impressed and horrified. "Field days at six? Lab days at five? Does she even sleep?"

Gen shot Senku a sly look. “And of course, *you* looked completely unfazed.”

Senku shrugged, arms crossed. “Clear instructions. No reason to be fazed.”

But there was a flicker of something in his expression—respect, sharp and rare, tugging faintly at the corner of his mouth. Nostalgia settled in just behind it, quiet but unmistakable. He missed her. More than he’d expected to. A real scientist like her, if she’d been revived? She probably would’ve had half the world’s infrastructure rebooted by now. It was a funny thought—biting and kind of reassuring all at once.

But still.

Yeah. He missed her.

> She paused, brows drawing in slightly as she scanned the data printout tacked to the whiteboard. Then, without a word, she lifted two fingers to her temple—light pressure, just beside her eye. Her eyes didn’t blink, just narrowed slightly. Focused. Senku tilted his head, watching her.
>
> “Is that some sort of thinking tic?” he asked.
>
> Okoye dropped her hand, looking mildly amused. “Conditioning. I trained myself to tune everything out under pressure. Back in the field, if you need ten seconds to think, you don’t get to say ‘hold on.’ You have to *make* your brain shut everything else out.”
>
> She looked back at the board, sharp again. “Touch-point thinking helps me isolate that mental lane. Nothing magic about it. Just a neurological redirect. It's like putting a finger to your temple, but when I was an over dramatic brat, I thought it looked cooler to put your fingers in front of you, and never bothered to change it.”

Chrome gasped. “Wait—wait, wait, wait. That’s the *thing!* The thing Senku *does!*”

Taiju’s jaw dropped. “No way. *That’s* where he got it from?!”

Kohaku blinked. “He even does it the same way—with the fingers and the tilt and everything.”

Yuzuriha’s eyes widened slightly. “I thought that was just a Senku thing…”

Gen didn’t say anything for a second—then let out a quiet, satisfied hum, eyes fixed on the screen.

“Well,” he said finally, “That explains a lot.”

Ryusui glanced over, curious. “You knew?”

“I suspected,” Gen admitted, steepling his fingers thoughtfully. “Touch-point habits like that aren’t just aesthetic—they’re often *borrowed.* Like how you pick up traits from your parents. Especially when someone admires the source. I thought Senku’s version had a kind of... deliberate sharpness to it. Like it was mimicking something precise. But I’ll admit, I didn’t expect it to come from someone else, it doesn't seem like his usual style.”

He smiled, just a little. “I eventually landed on it being a clever piece of personal theater. But no—turns out it was imprinting.”

Senku didn’t say anything at first. Then, after a beat: “Tch. Ten billion percent efficient. Why change what works?”

But his voice was quieter now, and his hand drifted up toward his temple almost without thinking, just resting there—light, steady, familiar.

Senku hummed. Noted.

It wasn't ritual. It wasn't some superstition or aesthetic flair. It was *practical.* Efficient. Effective.

Which made it useful.

"Do you know what we're actually doing out here?" She asked, turning her full attention back to him.

Senku smirked. "Establishing transmission modeling parameters for Zaire ebolavirus. Field strain. You're working on a sub-strain prediction algorithm based on region-specific vectors and emergent mutations that don't match historical spread patterns."

Then Gen sighed, already pinching the bridge of his nose. "I know I'm going to regret asking, but… what *are* the different strains of Ebola? And why focus on just one?"

Senku's eyes lit up immediately—no hesitation.

"Five major strains. Zaire, Sudan, Bundibugyo, Tai Forest, and Reston. Zaire's the most dangerous—highest mortality rate, most virulent, most likely to cause large-scale outbreaks. It's also the best-studied, which makes it viable for algorithm modeling." He was already counting them off on his fingers. "Sudan's bad, but not as efficient at transmission. Bundibugyo's unpredictable, Tai Forest is extremely rare, and Reston doesn't even affect humans—it's mostly in monkeys and pigs, and it *originated* in the Philippines, not Africa. Who knows what all this looks like now, everything is probably changed and evolved passed anything we knew about."

Chrome blinked rapidly. "Wait—there's one that doesn't affect humans at *all*?"

"Yet," Senku said bluntly. "Zoonotic viruses mutate. Reston's was just the polite one. Might not be anymore."

Yuzuriha stared. "How do you *remember* all that?"

"It's *Ebola,*" Senku replied like it was obvious. "You don't half-study hemorrhagic fevers."

Gen gave a dramatic sigh, leaning back. “And here I thought I was doing well just remembering which one causes the sneezing fits.”

“None of them,” Senku said dryly. “That’s a cold.” *Which Senku KNEW that Gen KNEW, which really just caused Senku to roll his eyes.*

She squinted at him.

Then turned to the open doorway. “Rajiv! You get the kid genius first!”

A young man—not quite young enough to be Senku’s peer, but still too scruffy and bright-eyed to be considered one of the “old scientists”—stepped into the lab, adjusting his lab coat over a faded T-shirt with a cracked World Health Organization logo stretched across the front. His curls were frizzing at the edges from the humidity, and he carried himself like someone who hadn’t had a full night’s sleep in a week and didn’t really care.

“Sweet, I get the kid? Lucky me.” He stepped forward with a gloved hand and a crooked grin. “Rajiv Patel. Microbiology. You do math, right? Good—because Ada yells at me when I try to code anything on less than two hours of sleep.”

Ryusui tilted his head, a glint of something unreadable passing through his eyes. “Programming, huh? That takes discipline. Reminds me of my brother—sharp as a whip, zero patience for people like me.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait, *you* have a brother?”

“Sure do,” Ryusui said, voice smooth but a little tight around the edges. “Used to drag him into number drills when we were kids. He hated it.” A beat. “Still turned out brilliant, though.”

Taiju leaned forward, voice hopeful. “Do you think we could find *him* someday? Rajiv, I mean. He seemed really nice. Like someone worth waking up.”

Senku's eyes stayed fixed on the screen, the faintest flicker of thought passing behind them.

"Possible," he said finally. "But it's been over 3,600 years. Without knowing where he was when the petrification hit—or whether his statue's intact—it's not likely." Senku would rather not think about it, would rather not think about him maybe being one of the many that were too far degraded to bring back, anything was possible. He would much rather learn more about this brother of Ryusui's, but even he had the emotional intelligence to not ask anything about that with the way that Ryusui of all people was acting.

> Senku accepted the handshake, noting the calluses and ink smudges. "Senku. From Japan. I don't yell. I just correct aggressively."
>
> Rajiv barked a laugh. "Perfect. You'll fit right in."

Gen groaned immediately, throwing his head back like he was reliving a war flashback. "Ah, yes. The *aggressive correction.* I once called something a *psychosomatic impulse,* and Senku interrupted me mid-sentence to explain why that phrasing was technically incorrect in a strictly clinical sense. While we were *in hiding.* I nearly died of secondhand embarrassment."

Chrome threw his hands up. "He stopped me in the middle of a sentence once! I was trying to explain how we were making sulfuric acid and I said 'sulfur melts down into—' and he *yelled* from across the river, '**IT DOESN'T MELT, IT SUBLIMATES.**' Like, how was I even supposed to know that?!"

Yuzuriha laughed softly. "Oh, I remember when I was trying to reconstruct a loom and I said something about the angle of the threads being 'probably good enough' and Senku just *appeared* behind me and launched into a ten-minute rant about tension ratios and material fatigue. I didn't even know he was *there!*"

Ukyo smiled faintly, arms crossed. "We were drawing maps one time and I rounded a measurement just slightly for convenience—like, by a single degree—and Senku stopped what he was doing, took the charcoal from my hand, and redrew it. Silently. It wasn't even a *verbal* correction. That somehow made it worse."

Kohaku nodded. “I said a river curved *eastward* once. He corrected me to *east-southeast,* then made me go look at the compass until I understood why. I didn’t even ask.”

Ryusui grinned. “I once said the wind was ‘about ten knots.’ He told me it was 11.2, and then recalibrated the sails without saying another word. *That* is what ‘correcting aggressively’ looks like.”

Taiju raised his hand slowly. “He corrected me for calling a rock a rock.”

Senku muttered, “It was *granite.*”

He didn’t let go of Senku’s hand right away. Instead, he leaned back slightly, giving him a quick once-over. Not judgmental—curious. Analytical.

“You’re really fifteen?”

“Technically sixteen. In two months.” Senku deadpanned.

“Jesus,” Rajiv muttered under his breath. Then: “Okay. No offense, but I thought they were kidding when I saw your file.”

Gen grinned. “Finally, someone with credentials gets to experience the *Senku Effect.*”

Yuzuriha laughed under her breath. “He’s always been like this. People underestimate him, and then two minutes later they’re stunned into silence.”

Senku just shrugged. He wasn't exactly shy or ashamed of his experience, “I am a little bit of an unusual case.”

Rajiv grinned again, a little wider this time. “Alright, fair. You’re cocky. That’ll help.”

He finally released the handshake and gestured vaguely to a cluttered corner of the lab. “Anyway, I’m mostly on the diagnostics side. Sample analysis, field test confirmations, pathogen behavior—you name it. We run swabs from outbreak zones and process them through the PCR systems, sometimes culture plates if we’ve got the time. My job is to confirm what we’re dealing with *before* we start sticking needles in people.”

Gen, watching from their side of the screen, tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing in thought.

Ah… so this is where it started. He didn't say it aloud, but the mental notes were already stacking. The way Senku handled bacterial sampling in the Stone World. The decontamination steps. The improvised centrifuge. The use of heat and time to isolate reactions. None of that was just theory—it was fieldwork. Applied knowledge. The kind you only picked up from people who *actually did it.*

Rajiv didn't just teach him protocols, Gen realized. *He taught him how to improvise without compromising results.*

Senku had been stubbornly brilliant before. But this—*this* was where he'd learned how to be brilliant with a time limit, bad tools, and a threat breathing down his neck.

Gen's gaze flicked toward Senku, watching the way his expression stayed sharp, focused, quietly respectful.

> Senku's eyes lit up a little. It sounded like fascinating work, "You work with field strains directly?"
>
> Rajiv nodded, clearly pleased by the interest. "Yeah. It's messy, but fascinating. Every time we get a new isolate, it's like solving a mystery—how fast it replicates, what host cells it prefers, its environmental thresholds. We build the profiles that inform containment and treatment plans."
>
> "And that informs the vaccine vector prioritization."
>
> "You catch on fast."
>
> "I read your last paper on recombinant protein markers for real-time outbreak detection. Your margin of error in humid environments is still off by 0.3%."

Taiju blinked. "Wait—was that a compliment or an insult?"

Gen didn’t even look surprised. “*Yes.*”

Yuzuriha giggled behind her hand. “I think it’s both. That’s Senku’s version of saying ‘I admire your work, but I also fixed it in my head three weeks ago.’”

Rajiv blinked.

Then laughed. “God, you’re like a caffeinated X-ray. Alright, noted— *do not try to bullshit you.* Got it.”

Senku smirked.

They moved around the lab together after that, Rajiv pointing out different equipment, explaining which devices were actually functional and which ones were being held together by zip ties, duct tape, and prayers. He handed Senku a clipboard at one point with mock solemnity. A little too childish, almost like he wasn't quite sure how to treat him like a colleague yet, which Senku understood logically, “Here—initiation gift. It’s cursed. Enjoy.”

So he accepted the clipboard without comment, already scanning the outdated log entries and mapping the inconsistencies.

Yuzuriha’s eyes sparkled. She looked around at the others, smiling a little more knowingly now. “And he didn’t even get offended when Senku corrected him! That’s how you *know* he’s legit. Seriously. That’s one of the rules, right? If you want to be close to Senku, you have to learn not to take that stuff personally.”

Chrome nodded eagerly. “Yeah! That’s how he shows he respects you!”

“He’s just trying to keep things accurate,” Taiju added cheerfully. “It’s how he cares!”

Gen let out a soft laugh, folding his hands under his chin. “Mm, yes—nothing says love like ‘actually, you're wrong.’” He tilted his head toward Senku, eyes glinting with amusement. “Isn’t that right, scientist?”

Silence.

Senku's jaw tightened, but he didn't lift his gaze from the screen. It was good to see them on the screen, but it had been HOURS of his friends digging into him, then being forced to face his feelings for Gen by Yuzuriha, and he was tired. So tired.

"…Sure," he muttered. "Whatever helps you rationalize it."

Yuzuriha blinked. "Senku?"

He didn't answer. His arms were still crossed, but his grip had gone rigid—shoulders just slightly hunched forward, like he was trying to make himself smaller without realizing it. He wasn't smiling. Not even the usual sarcastic flicker. Just watching. Listening. Enduring.

Ukyo's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly.

Gen noticed too—but said nothing.

Ryusui, oblivious to the tension, chuckled. "Ah, come now. Don't get shy on us now, Senku. We've all survived your sharp tongue. You're practically a rite of passage."

Another long pause.

Senku exhaled through his nose, sharp and shallow.

"Tch. Must be exhausting for everyone."

And that was it. Quiet. Flat. Not dismissive—just… *done.*

“You seem… unnaturally okay with all this,” Rajiv said after a while, not unkindly. “Most first-timers look at the numbers and realize what they mean and run away puking, at least for the first week.”

Senku’s response was simple. “It’s not emotional for me. It’s data.”

Rajiv tilted his head. “Yeah? Well, just so you know—we’re not just saving lives. We’re also dealing with people. Don’t let Ada hear you say that or she’ll make you talk to the community liaisons for a week. not that she is a people person herself, but that's why she brings us onto the team.”

Senku was still freakishly unmoving.

Gen noticed.

He leaned forward slightly, voice casual—*too* casual. “Oof. Can you imagine that? Senku stuck in a room doing *outreach talks*? Handing out flyers about handwashing and answering heartfelt questions from strangers?”

Chrome snorted. “With, like, three kids clinging to him asking if he’s a wizard.”

Ryusui grinned wide. “And some poor translator trying to explain why the scientist with the terrifying eyes keeps saying things like ‘cellular degeneration vectors.’”

“Oh!” Taiju added brightly. “And they give him one of those clipboards with cartoon germs on it and make him wear a smiley badge!”

Yuzuriha giggled. “You’d look cute, Senku. A little horrifying, but cute.”

Gen smiled, leaning back just a little. “See? That’s what we’re missing. Not a virus outbreak —just Senku forced into *community service.*”

The laughter rolled around them. Chrome couldn’t stop wheezing. Taiju nudged Yuzuriha. Even Ryusui was wiping tears from his eyes, muttering something about “the real human trial.”

Senku… breathed.

A slow inhale. A slower exhale. One beat. Two.

Then: “Hah. Yeah,” he said, voice low. “Me. Talking to people. Total nightmare.”

It landed. The others took it as a joke, folded it into the laughter, rolled with it. But Gen didn’t. Because he caught the way Senku’s shoulders never really relaxed. How he didn’t crack a smile. How his eyes never left the screen. He was clearly trying to self regulate, but not really there yet.

Yuzuriha did too—her gaze flicked toward him, softening. She didn’t say anything, but her worry was clear.

> “Thanks for the warning.”
>
> Rajiv’s grin softened a little, less joking now. “I mean it. You’re smart. Brilliant, even. But that’ll only take you so far out here. Grit and grace—that’s what keeps the science alive when everything else goes to hell, and it will. Take a little advice from your, what's the word in Japanese? Senpai?"
>
> Senku didn’t respond, but something about the phrasing seemed to lodge in the back of his mind.
>
> It would stay there for a long, long time.

No one spoke for a moment.

The joke had passed. And something deeper had landed.

Yuzuriha looked over at Senku, her fingers fidgeting lightly against the hem of her shirt. “That was… good advice.”

Ukyo nodded slowly, but his eyes never left Senku. “Hard-earned, too. You can hear it.”

“‘Grit and grace,’ huh,” Gen echoed, quieter now. “I don’t think anyone’s ever said that to you before.”

Senku didn’t answer. He wasn’t fighting them. He wasn’t deflecting. He was just... somewhere else. Not absent. Not dissociating. Just thinking too hard.

Gen watched him carefully. It was subtle—barely noticeable to anyone else—but the corner of Senku’s mouth had twitched downward, not in irritation, but in conflict. Like the words touched something he didn’t want to admit was raw. Or true.

“Guess he’s not wrong,” Gen said gently. “You’ve got grit in spades. Grace, though? Might take a little more work.”

Still no reply. But Senku’s hand came up—not dramatically, not defensively—just lightly pressing two fingers near his temple. The same unconscious touch-point he’d picked up years ago. A silent reflex. One that said he needed a second. That screamed that he was trying to focus, because that was what Senku used that for, but it didn't seem to be making focus come to him.

Chrome opened his mouth to speak, but Yuzuriha gently put a hand on his arm and shook her head.

Gen stretched casually, the motion practiced and easy. “Well,” he said, tone light, “we’ve been at this a while. Might be time to call it for tonight.”

Chrome glanced over, confused. *Already?* They usually pushed through way longer than this. Yuzuriha blinked, then slowly nodded. She didn’t quite understand why Gen was pausing, but something in his voice made her trust it. Ryusui leaned back with a lopsided grin, but his eyes flicked to Senku. No retort. No scoff. *Strange.* Taiju shifted, uncertain. *Senku always fights the break something must be wrong, Gen is smart!* Ukyo didn’t say anything. Just watched. Quiet. Measuring.

Senku exhaled—short, tired. “Fine. Pause it.”

No sarcasm. No annoyance. Just flat.

Chrome rubbed the back of his neck, unsettled by how easily Senku agreed.

Senku hadn’t moved. He just leaned back slowly, rubbing the side of his face like he was wiping something off that wasn’t there.

Gen stood up slowly, brushing imaginary dust from his sleeves, and without a word, reached out and tugged Senku lightly by the sleeve. Senku didn’t argue. Didn’t even look surprised. He just stood up, silent, and followed. Their footsteps echoed softly against the stone and metal as they left the chamber. The hallway lights were low, casting long shadows. No one tried to stop them—no one even asked.

As they passed the door, a soft voice stopped them—just barely loud enough to hear.

“I’m sorry,” Yuzuriha said, eyes on the floor. “For earlier. I think I made it worse.”

Her words were aimed at Senku, but her glance darted to Gen—an acknowledgment, maybe, that she saw it too now. That she understood a little too late how close to the edge he already was.

Senku shook his head once. Small. Measured. Soft and even, not hurt or distressed, but that might have made it sound worse, “You didn’t,” he said quietly. “I’m just… bad at this.”

Nothing more.

Yuzuriha didn’t try to say anything else. She just nodded, stepped back, and let them pass. They walked in silence the rest of the way. Gen didn’t guide him toward the main quarters or the open bunks. He led him to the back of the science area—tucked away, a little more private, surrounded by scraps of half-built schematics and disassembled equipment. It wasn’t much, but it was Senku’s. And for now, it was enough.

As they reached the threshold, Gen didn’t speak. Not yet.

The science area was dim, lit only by the low glow of a half-finished filament coil left plugged in. Gen stepped inside first, slipping past scattered papers and the curled edge of a blueprint, then turned just enough to watch Senku follow. Senku didn’t say anything. Just dropped lightly onto the edge of his workbench like his whole body was running on habit, not thought. Gen leaned against the wall nearby, crossing his arms loosely—not blocking the exit, not crowding him, just *there*.

For a few seconds, neither of them spoke.

And Gen thought.

It’s not just the prodding, he realized. *It’s everything at once.*

The constant teasing. The spotlight on every past connection. The way Yuzuriha and Ukyo and Chrome kept looking at Senku like they were *trying* to understand, even when it meant talking around the things Senku wasn’t ready to explain. And then there was *them.*

Us.

The flirtation. The tension. The *something* that was changing—but hadn't dared touch it. Not fully. Gen let his eyes drift to Senku's profile—the set jaw, the downward stare, the breath caught a little too long in his chest. *He's spiraling,* Gen thought. *And he thinks it's because he slipped. Because he let something show.*

He closed his eyes briefly.

Then opened them again.

Time to be the mentalist.

"I get it," Gen said softly. "It's a lot."

Senku didn't answer, but his head tilted slightly—enough to show he was listening.

Gen kept his voice light, careful. "The pressure. Everyone talking. The looks. The assumptions. All of it."

Still no answer.

Gen smiled faintly. "You know, if it helps—don't worry too much about… me. Or *that.*"

That got a flicker. Not a full look, but Senku's eyes shifted in his direction for a heartbeat.

So Gen pressed on, gently.

“I know I’m a walking flirt warning sign, but it’s not like I expect anything. Seriously. If it made things weird, don’t overthink it. We can dial it all back to business as usual. No big deal. If if you want, you can play into it, just for fun. Nothing serious. I get it, whatever you want, whatever makes you comfortable.”

He said it like it was easy.

He said it like it didn’t hurt.

And he said it *because it mattered* more that Senku could breathe than that Gen got to hope.

Senku still didn’t speak.

But his hand—resting on the bench—curled into a loose fist.

Gen didn’t push.

He just stayed there. Quiet. Soft-spoken. Waiting.

Letting Senku know that *if nothing else,* he was safe here.

Senku hadn’t moved. His hands were on either side of him on the bench, shoulders slightly hunched like he was caught between bracing and folding in. Gen didn’t press. Didn’t shift. Just waited, gaze steady, knowing that if Senku was going to say anything, it’d come slowly, one sharp-edged word at a time. And finally— “…Yuzuriha said something similar.”

Gen blinked, but didn’t speak.

Senku kept his eyes forward, fixed on some vague point across the room. His voice was flat, but low—like he was rationing out the words so they wouldn't come out wrong.

"She said… that people who care about each other can still just tease one another. That it doesn't have to mean anything serious. That it's okay if I—" He cut himself off, jaw tight. Then, after a pause, he added, quieter, "If I keep being like this."

Gen didn't breathe.

Senku's hands flexed slightly against the bench. "But it doesn't seem fair. Not if I'm going to keep... acting like I'm interested. I'm not interested in having any sort of relationship right now. Any relationships or friendships need to not have weight behind them, casual. But this... That's not casual for me. I don't know *how* to make it casual. So…"

His voice thinned.

"…Are *you* actually okay with that? If I act like this knowing that I'm not going to do anything about it?"

And Gen—poor Gen—felt his chest pull tight in a way that almost *betrayed him*.

Because the answer?

No.
Not really.
Not even close.

But the look on Senku's face—*tense, uncertain, exposed*—wasn't something he saw often. And it wasn't something he was about to break just for his own honesty. So he smiled. Slow. Soft. Effortless. Turned the charm up like a spotlight and folded it around him like silk. This, for now, was his stage, and one performance that he couldn't afford to throw.

“Senku,” he said easily, voice warm and teasing at just the right temperature, “We’re friends. Friends flirt sometimes, especially mine. It’s practically our job.”

Senku glanced at him—brief, sharp, searching. Like he was checking for cracks in the surface.

Gen didn’t let a single one show.

“It’s okay,” he added, gentler now. “Really. I’m not going to fall apart just because you’re distracted by my devastating good looks.”

A pause.

Then—just barely—Senku snorted. Quiet. Corner of his mouth twitching.

Gen took that as a win.

Even if it twisted a little in his chest.

He leaned back a bit, giving Senku space but not leaving. “Besides,” he added, voice softer now, realer, “You and I already agreed to share the mental load, didn’t we?”

His eyes flicked toward the dim glow of a dormant filament coil, like he could still see the weight of it all—the secrets, the science, the decisions no one else could carry.

“That hasn’t changed. Not for this. Not for anything. We’re already headed to hell together, remember? Might as well enjoy the company.”

There was a pause—longer this time. Comfortable. Just barely.

Then Gen lifted his chin slightly. “Now. Do you want to talk about how everyone else piling on probably made this worse? Or are we pretending you didn’t nearly short-circuit just now?”

Senku exhaled slowly.

Then leaned back on the bench with a faint shrug.

“Nah. I’ll survive.”

His voice wasn’t sharp… A little hoarse around the edges. Gen watched him for another moment—read the way his shoulders sat just a little lower now, the tension not gone, but looser. And for tonight, that was enough.

The next morning, the world was quiet.

Senku sat up slowly, blinking against the faint light filtering through the small window above the science area. The coil he’d left glowing overnight had burned out sometime while he slept. Everything smelled like warm metal and solder dust and half-finished equations.

He ran a hand through his hair.

Still a mess.

Still him.

His eyes drifted toward the scattered notes on the table beside him—calculations he didn't remember finishing, the corner of a blueprint curled up like a sleeping cat, and a post-it left at a slant across his clipboard. In Gen's looping handwriting, it read: *"Don't forget to hydrate, genius. Would be a shame if you passed out and missed more of my charm."* Beneath it was a doodle of a sparkly-eyed caricature—definitely meant to be Gen—winking obnoxiously and holding a sign that said: *"#1 Burden-Sharing Partner."*

Senku scoffed under his breath.

Not because it was funny. Not because it was clever.

Just because it was… normal.

And for the first time in what felt like hours, normal wasn't unbearable.

He stood, stretched—stiff shoulders, tight neck—and grabbed his outer coat from the hook beside the door. The halls were cool as he moved through them, the metal underfoot humming faintly beneath his steps. He passed no one. Heard no one.

Until he reached the door to the playback room.

He paused.

The weight in his chest was… lighter. Not gone. Just redistributed. Easier to carry.

Yesterday had cracked something open. He hadn't said much. He *wouldn't* say much. But Gen had known anyway. Had taken the hit like it was easy. Had lied for him like it was instinct.

And that... hadn't gone unnoticed.

Senku took a slow breath and pushed the door open.

Inside, the others were already gathered—Ukyo scanning the controls, Chrome sprawled over the back of a chair upside down for some reason, Taiju offering fruit to *everyone* like they hadn't eaten ten minutes ago. Yuzuriha looked up immediately as he entered, eyes flicking over his face—not worried, but watching. Measuring. She gave him a soft nod. He returned it.

Ryusui whistled low. "Our fearless scientist returns."

Gen was leaning lazily against the console, one leg crossed over the other, posture easy as ever.

"Sleep well, Senku-chan?" he asked lightly, as if nothing the night before had happened. As if the world hadn't tilted a few degrees in silence.

Senku gave a half-shrug and moved to his seat.

"Enough," he said. "Let's get back to it."

No protest. No eye-roll. No sarcasm.

But Gen didn't need more than that.

Not this morning.

He just smiled, tilted his head, and reached toward the screen.

“Then back to hell we go,” he murmured.

And the screen lit up again.

> The third member of the team joined them during midmorning rounds—a tall, broad-shouldered man with heavy boots, deep crow’s feet, and the body language of someone who had stopped trusting most people two jobs ago.
>
> Luis Moretti didn’t smile when they were introduced.
>
> Didn’t shake hands either.
>
> “Logistics, Security. Transportation. If something’s missing, stolen, late, or broken—it’s probably my problem. I keep things together and running here using the last bit of scrap from the bottom of the bin.” Luis sounded low and gravily when he spoke, almost like a chain smoker. He gave Senku a long, slow once-over. “Kid, huh?”

Ukyo narrowed his eyes at the screen, arms folded loosely. “That’s the guy,” he said softly. “The one Senku mentioned—when he fired the crossbow.”

Chrome perked up immediately. “Wait, *this* guy taught Senku how to use that thing? He looks like he could snap a tree in half.” Then he grinned and elbowed Kohaku lightly. “Just like our gorilla.”

Kohaku’s eyes narrowed in mock offense. “Excuse me?”

Yuzuriha tilted her head, studying the man’s posture. “He doesn’t seem like the friendly mentor type…”

“No,” Ukyo murmured studying the man with steady eyes.

Ryusui’s gaze flicked toward the screen with interest, one brow raised. “He moves like security. Not military—too independent. More like someone who’s been *just* on the right side of illegal for a long time.”

“He didn’t even blink during that introduction,” Gen noted, lacing his fingers and leaning forward slightly. “Did you see how long he stared at Senku-chan? Not sizing him up like a threat. More like…” He paused, then smirked. “Like he was wondering where Ada found something so young and breakable to put on his team.”

Ukyo let out a quiet hum. “His grip is off-balance on purpose. Right boot’s worn differently than the left—he compensates when he turns. Probably prefers sidearm or crossbow-style tension anchors, not vertical forms like me.”

Everyone stared at him.

Ukyo blinked mildly. “What?"

Yuzuriha smiled. “It's just impressive, is all."

Senku, still seated in the playback room, didn’t interrupt. But his jaw had set—not defensive, just... focused. Watching Luis on screen with something like recognition.

Gen caught it.

So that’s the kind of man he modeled from, he thought. *Not friendly. Not warm. But reliable under fire. A survivalist. He might have learned the science from Ada and Rajiv, but that ability to look at your surroundings and pick out useful things probably came from Luis. That explains how he comes up with plans as well. Smart as Senku-chan is, that is science smart. The tactics that he uses against Tsukasa aren't from science, and had to have come from somewhere.*

He didn’t say it aloud. Just tucked it away.

Chrome squinted. “So this guy taught Senku all that tactical stuff?”

Senku snorted faintly. “No one *taught* me. I just paid attention.”

“Ten billion percent sure,” Gen said wryly. “Because if I were trying to teach you anything, I’d definitely do it by standing ten feet away and scowling through it.”

That earned a few quiet chuckles, but no one looked away from the screen.

Senku didn’t flinch under the scrutiny. “Underaged, overqualified.”

Luis stared for another beat, then cracked the ghost of a smile. “Great. That makes one of us.”

Rajiv, standing just behind Senku, snorted. “He says that, but Luis is the only one of us who knows how to hotwire a satellite van *and* fix a solar inverter.”

Ukyo whistled low. “Fixing a solar whatever on the fly. That’s not just security. That’s survival engineering.”

Yuzuriha gave a tiny, awed laugh. “I think we’ve found Senku’s long-lost mentor.”

“Mentor?” Gen murmured, almost to himself. He leaned forward slightly, fingers steepled in front of his mouth as his eyes tracked Luis across the screen. “Mm… no. Not quite. Senku doesn’t take to traditional mentorship. Not the kind with authority and rules. He doesn’t follow—you’ve all noticed that by now. But he *watches*. Constantly.”

Gen’s voice dropped a little, more speculative now, “He wouldn’t have needed praise, or structure, or even kindness. He’d have watched someone like this—someone who survived by adapting—and filed away every little move. What to salvage. What to bypass. How to build something functional out of garbage and failure.”

He tilted his head, lips quirking faintly.

“This… this is where he learned to be scrappy.”

Ryusui raised a brow. “Scrappy?”

“Mm.” Gen gestured vaguely. “You’ve seen it. Senku’s whole ‘it doesn’t need to be pretty, it just needs to work’ philosophy. That didn’t come from textbooks. That came from watching people like *this*.”

Senku didn’t say anything as the others kept talking. Luis was still on the screen—arms crossed, weight leaned slightly to one side like he didn’t trust anyone enough to keep both feet still. His voice was gravel, his face unreadable, and even now, years later, he still looked like the kind of man who only operated in emergencies because everything else was too quiet to be worth his time.

And they weren’t wrong.

Not Gen. Not Ukyo. Not any of them.

He did learn from Luis.

Not in the way people imagined—not through lessons or praise or training. Luis didn’t teach. He demonstrated. He made things work. Not because it was inspiring, but because it was *necessary*. And Senku, back then, had watched every second. Not because he admired him, but because *it worked*. Hotwired vans. Rebuilt inverters. Fixed the world with whatever was left.

Scrap science.

Senku’s fingers curled loosely around the edge of his chair.

Yeah, he thought. *Scrappy. That tracks.*

He could feel their eyes on him sometimes—his friends, his people. Picking through the pieces of who he used to be like puzzle fragments scattered on the floor. Watching it all unfold without asking permission. Seeing the past he never planned to explain. It didn't feel *bad*, exactly. Just… exposed. But that was the whole point of this, wasn't it? The playback. The memories. The proof of what built them.

Senku took a slow breath and forced himself to sit with it. The break had helped but still...

There's no point avoiding what's already on the screen, he reasoned. *If they're going to see it, better it's useful. Better it means something.*

> Luis grunted. "Because I'm the only one who *reads* the damn manuals."
>
> Senku raised an eyebrow. "Or maybe because everyone else was too busy vomiting in field suits? From what I've heard so far that seems to be a running problem around here."
>
> Rajiv let out a wheezing laugh. "Ohhhh, you're gonna fit in just fine."
>
> Luis didn't laugh, but his posture eased, just barely. "You talk big, kid. Hope you work big, too."

Ukyo tilted his head. "It'd be interesting to watch the roles reversed. Usually Senku delegates down—gives us the theory, lets us test the parts. But if he's the new guy here…"

"Oh, he's definitely the one getting assigned to test the centrifuge with questionable seals," Gen said, amusement curling at the edge of his voice. "Maybe even cleaning the biohazard fridge."

He crossed one leg over the other, dramatically smug. "Frankly, I find the idea *delightful.* I've spent years hauling supplies and scrubbing rust off pipes because someone was 'too busy calculating boiling points.' Let *him* do the hard labor for once."

Taiju blinked. “But Senku already works hard…”

“That’s different,” Gen waved. “He works *Senku hard*. High-effort, low-mess. This is *different* hard. Manual labor. Bodily fluids. Reading the fine print.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Taiju interrupted, lifting both hands and shaking his head. “You guys are acting like Senku’s *never* done grunt work.”

Everyone turned toward him.

Taiju’s voice softened with that mix of pride and protectiveness that only came out when he was serious. “You all woke up with him already building everything. But I *watched* him start from nothing. No tools. No fire. No help. Just… Senku. Doing all of it by himself for over a year.”

The room quieted a little.

“Yeah, he’s not a ‘biohazard fridge’ kind of guy,” Taiju went on, scratching the back of his neck. “But he’s definitely a ‘hauls his own wood, builds his own lab, and carries every weird rock down a mountain’ kind of guy. He worked harder than anyone I’ve ever met. Still does.”

There was a pause.

Then Gen exhaled, smile softening just slightly.

“Touché, Taiju-chan.”

Senku, who’d been watching the screen in silence, finally turned his head just slightly. His eyes found Taiju’s—not dramatic, not teary, just *quiet.* Open. Grateful in a way he didn’t know how to express aloud. A beat passed. Then the corner of his mouth lifted—barely. The kind of smile only people who *really* knew him would notice.

Taiju beamed back without hesitation, like he hadn't even realized he'd said anything unusual.

Yuzuriha, sitting beside him, didn't say a word either. She just smiled, soft and sure, eyes flicking to Senku in silent acknowledgment.

Senku held his gaze, tone flat. "Work doesn't scare me. Wasting time does."

That earned a real reaction—Luis actually tilted his head, considering. "Yeah. You'll do."

They didn't talk much more after that, but as they loaded up the battered field truck with equipment, Luis made a point of showing Senku how to brace the heavier crates so the contents wouldn't shake loose on the unpaved roads. He didn't explain anything—just grunted instructions, tapped the edges of the reinforced boxes, and gestured at the cables like Senku should already know what to do. Which, annoyingly, Senku mostly *did* . Luis had seemed a mixture of annoyed and impressed with that.

By the end of the day, Luis tossed him a multipurpose tool without comment, and Senku accepted it like a handshake.

The others were still chuckling over the tool hand-off when Ryusui leaned back slightly, arms crossed, a thoughtful glint in his eye. His gaze didn't leave the screen, not even for a second.

"Well now," he murmured. "That man's not just muscle. *I want him."*

Beside him, Francois inclined their head slightly. "Indeed. A logistical mind with hands-on capability. Rare. Reliable. Low ego, high output."

"A dream hire," Ryusui said with a grin. "Terse, yes, but if we could drag him into the our new company, I wouldn't hesitate to make him head of operations."

Francois gave a quiet hum, fingers steepled. "He would not tolerate mismanagement. Or inefficiency. But with the right systems, and the right incentives…"

Ryusui's grin sharpened. "You're thinking what I'm thinking."

"Mm. A man like that is best acquired with purpose," Francois said. "Not flattery. Not promises. A task worth doing, and the tools to do it well."

"Offer him the right challenge," Ryusui murmured, "and he'll bind himself to it. We know that because he already did. No one ends up in an operation like this by accident—not with skills like his. Logistics, security, repair work in the middle of a viral field crisis? He could be making a fortune somewhere else. But he chose this. Chose *them*."

His smile thinned just slightly—still bright, but sharper now. Calculating.

"That's the kind of man who only backs something when he believes in the mission. The problem. The stakes."

Francois tilted their head thoughtfully. "Perhaps even more interesting—Senku did not need to *earn* his favor through charm or allegiance. Only through proof of function. That tells me his standards are precise."

"High stakes," Ryusui agreed. "High standards. But once he gives you the nod…" He gestured toward the screen as Luis tossed Senku the multipurpose tool. "That's *loyalty*. Not loud. Not performative. But unshakable."

They sat in silence for a moment longer, watching the screen.

Then Ryusui gave a short laugh. "A man like that? He's *expensive.*"

Francois's smile was subtle. "But worth every coin."

By noon, Senku had been handed his official badge, a folder of clearance codes, and a week's worth of clinical documentation on local cases. They didn't sugarcoat it—the infection rate was erratic, the nearby river water was a breeding ground, and they were operating under tight political oversight from multiple NGOs.

Dr. Okoye passed him on the way to her third cup of coffee and tossed a slim red booklet toward his chest. Senku caught it one-handed.

"This is what we tell the donors."

He flipped it open, skimming the bullet points on 'Community Outreach Impact Metrics' and 'Projected Containment Timeline.'

"Which means it's only about forty percent accurate?"

"Thirty, after all if we lose funding we will be losing the lives that we save, a little smudging of the facts never hurt a fat wallet," She corrected with a grin, sharp and unashamed, "But you'll get to write the next one if you can bump our treatment efficacy up by even two percent."

Ryusui let out a low whistle, leaning forward with interest as the red booklet flipped open.

"Oh, I like her," he said, grinning. "She's got teeth."

Chrome blinked. "Wait—so they're just... lying to the people funding this?"

"It's not lying," Ryusui replied smoothly. "It's *selective narrative control.*"

Yuzuriha raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like lying."

"It sounds like *winning,*" Ryusui shot back, still watching the screen with a spark in his eye. "If shaving a few numbers keeps the doors open and the labs running, then by all means—smudge away. That's just smart resource management."

Francois nodded slightly, hands clasped. “In an environment where resources are tied to presentation rather than need, such embellishments are not uncommon. The ethics are murky, but the logic is sound.”

Gen raised a brow, glancing sidelong at Senku. “And how do you feel about being the guy who writes the next one?”

Senku didn’t answer immediately, his mentality was still much the same as it was before. If you could make the numbers true AND get more funding, all the better. So what if they were purposely confusing, that wasn't his job, the numbers talked. If someone couldn't figure it out themselves.... Then, with a shrug: “If the new numbers are real, they won’t have to lie as much.”

Ryusui laughed. “Spoken like a man who’s going to fix the system *and* make it look good doing it.”

But Ukyo’s voice cut in—quiet, even, not confrontational.

“I get it,” he said. “The stakes are high. The system’s flawed. But… where’s the line? If you start justifying lies to donors, how long before it bleeds into how you treat the people you’re supposed to protect?”

The room stilled for a moment.

Ukyo didn’t press. He just looked at the screen, thoughtful.

“I’m not saying it’s wrong,” he added softly. “I’m just saying… that kind of logic is slippery. Even if it’s necessary, it costs something.”

Senku glanced at him, but didn’t argue. Neither did Ryusui.

Rajiv leaned in over Senku's shoulder, craning his neck. "Don't let her fool you, the last person who tried to edit one of those ended up writing press blurbs for a mosquito net company when the donors dropped the funding by 10 percent. Ada was pissed."

"Still better than playing courier for UN spreadsheets," Luis grunted from across the room as he loaded the last of the test kits into a secured metal crate.

"Bet I could write something so bullshit but real that it made them want to empty their wallets more," Senku muttered, closing the manual. "All right. Where's the real data?"

Dr. Okoye looked almost smug. "Knew I liked you."

Chrome blinked. "Wait, wait—someone *lost funding* just for tweaking the wording?"

Gen let out a soft *tsk*, shaking his head with exaggerated pity. "Oof. That's the dark magic of donor language, my friends. One overly optimistic adjective and *bam*—you're writing press blurbs for mosquito nets instead of saving lives." He laced his fingers together, leaning back with a smirk. "Donor engagement is a performance. You don't sell the truth—you sell the *narrative* of progress. The illusion of stability. They don't want details. They want to feel like they've already fixed the problem by cutting the check."

"Still better than pushing spreadsheets across four continents," Ryusui said cheerfully. "That's a bureaucratic death sentence."

Ukyo, arms folded, exhaled through his nose. "You know what? I take back half of what I said earlier. If funding drops *that* fast for *that* important of a mission… maybe bending the truth *is* part of survival."

Yuzuriha gave a tiny nod. "It's still not ideal… but I'm starting to understand why she said it with a smile."

Onscreen, Senku's quiet mutter cut through the scene: *"Bet I could write something so bullshit but real that it made them want to empty their wallets more."*

Chrome burst into laughter. “Oh man, he *would.* He totally would.”

Gen’s grin widened. “I’d pay to see him try.”

It came out smoothly, like a joke—but the moment hung just a little longer than it should have.

Because *God*, he meant it.

Watching Senku like this—confident, calculating, throwing out lines that danced right on the edge of moral gray and made it look effortless—it wasn’t just impressive. When Senku acted like that now, fully grown, fully impressive and *him...* It was *hot*. Senku didn’t need to charm anyone. He didn’t pander. He *rewrote the rules* and made other people grateful for it. That wasn’t science. That was manipulation. Beautiful, logical, devastating manipulation.

And Gen was weak to it.

He always had been. That sharp edge in Senku—the way his mind moved like a blade, cutting straight to the core of a problem, stripping it of its emotion, reframing it so people *wanted* to agree with him even if they didn’t understand why.

It was the kind of talent Gen had spent his whole life refining on stage.

And Senku did it *by accident.*

Or maybe not.

Maybe that was the worst part.

He folded his arms more tightly across his chest, forcing the smile to stay right where it was supposed to be.

Because this was the version of Senku that Gen admired most.

And right now?

That was exactly the version he wasn't allowed to want. Not after their conversation. He had to keep it light, keep it professional. Be there, but not allow his own considerable emotions break through the glass and make Senku feel pressured, he was already dealing that that enough. It had been a misstep earlier to push Senku as much as he did, and that wasn't a mistake he was going to make again.

Ryusui smirked, breaking Gen's thoughts, "Senku, professional science swindler. I'll get the brand licensing started."

> She turned on her heel and led him into a smaller, locked cabinet room in the back. Rajiv followed without asking, waving his badge in front of the sensor and flicking on the overhead fluorescents. Inside was the good stuff. Charts on outbreak clusters, real water quality readouts, PCR cycle thresholds from the field, mortality tracking models. No polished slides or donor-friendly numbers here. Just raw data.
>
> Senku's hands itched.
>
> "You're allowed to work off-hours," Luis called from the hallway. "But if you miss your shots, I'm not patching up another cocky kid with a needle phobia."

Yuzuriha's smile dropped the moment Luis's voice echoed down the hallway.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Oh no," she said, in that deceptively sweet tone that meant she was *already furious.* "We are *not* doing this again."

Chrome blinked. "Doing what?"

“The part where someone tells Senku he’s ‘allowed’ to overwork like it’s a *treat.*” Yuzuriha huffed, crossing her arms with a kind of righteous indignation that only someone who’s spent *years* watching Senku fall asleep mid-sentence could manage. “He takes that as an invitation to *not* sleep for three days and start chewing on pencils.”

“She’s not wrong,” Gen muttered. “I once watched him nod off mid-equation with graphite between his teeth. It was… interesting.”

Ryusui grinned. “Ah, but brilliance never sleeps!”

“Yeah, and neither does burnout,” Yuzuriha snapped back, every bit the iron-willed caretaker. Her eyes wide and hands on her hips as she scolded.

Taiju nodded enthusiastically, fists clenched. Definitely knowing better than to disagree with her, not that he would have, “Right! He needs rest or he’ll explode!”

She nodded, but the energy started fading off, not without shooting a stern look Senku's way, as if he was currently pulling those types of hours, and he wasn't. There was no need to , not yet anyway.

> “I’ll sedate him myself,” Rajiv added cheerfully.
>
> “Doubt it’ll come to that,” Senku muttered, already rifling through the reports. He wasn't paying attention to them anymore, the words left without any consideration as he focused in on what he wanted to be here for, the data, the science, “But if it does, I’ll make my own sedative. I don't trust whatever makeshift sedative you've come up with, considering the budgeting issues in this little hovel.”
>
> Dr. Okoye just laughed, deep and pleased. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”
>
> Senku was already in love with the job.

Yuzuriha’s eyes narrowed again, mouth pinched into a sharp frown. “Nope. Nope! I don’t care how smart he is—he is *not* allowed to medicate himself just because he’s suspicious of someone else’s sedative! That’s not how healthcare works!”

“Y’know, falling into work like that—it’s not always about passion,” he said softly. “Psychologically, it can be a defense mechanism. When things get overwhelming, some people don’t shut down. They just… focus harder. Rewire the stress into productivity.”

Francois gave a quiet nod. “A kind of functional dissociation.”

Gen glanced at the screen again, tone gentle. “Exactly. You bury everything that’s hurting behind calculations. Equations. Deadlines. You start to believe that if you’re useful enough, no one will notice you’re struggling.”

There was a flicker of movement beside him. Senku’s shoulders had gone still. Too still. Not tense like anger—but like someone bracing. Like someone recognizing the shape of something they didn’t want said out loud.

Gen caught it immediately.

And he *stopped.*

The shift in his posture was smooth, practiced—he slipped the weight off his voice with barely a breath, the mentalist sliding back into place.

“Of course,” he said, suddenly brighter, lighter, with a mock sigh. “In *my* case, I just focus really hard on being charming. Terribly exhausting, but it keeps people from asking too many questions.”

Chrome laughed a little. “I mean, you *are* pretty good at that.”

“Tragically so,” Gen said breezily, flashing a grin. “We all have our burdens.”

Senku didn’t say anything.

But the tension in his shoulders faded just enough.

The fieldwork began the next morning.

They drove three hours into the district—over red dust roads, past children waving from schoolyards and goats crossing intersections like they owned the place. They arrived at a small clinic barely larger than a classroom. Nurses greeted them with warm nods and bottles of disinfectant. They moved fast, efficient, quiet—every motion carrying the weight of habit and necessity. Rajiv walked Senku through blood draw protocols, Luis kept an eye on the perimeter, and Dr. Okoye shouted over the generator as she negotiated cold storage availability with the clinic lead.

Senku watched everything.

Filed away details.

Analyzed procedures.

By the time they made it back to the field office, the sun was dipping below the rooftops of Kampala, staining the sky in rich reds and bruised purples. The dust from the road still clung to their boots, and the hum of distant traffic mixed with the buzz of the lab’s generator. Senku stepped out of the truck first, pulling his goggles down around his neck, already mid-sentence.

“If we stagger intake by contact priority—symptomatic first, then confirmed exposures—we’ll reduce cross-contamination and patient wait time. That’ll also free up Rajiv’s PCR station by at least forty minutes a day.”

Chrome’s eyes were wide. “Whoa… that’s what his *first* day looked like?”

Yuzuriha pressed a hand to her chest. “It’s so fast. There’s no time to settle in, no time to even breathe.”

“Welcome to field medicine,” Ukyo said quietly.

Gen didn't really know what to do. Senku was reluctant about them seeing these parts of him, but at the same time it was Gen's position, his job, to talk about the things that he notied. Senku of the future had already been through all this, knew that it was going to be difficult on the current Senku, and weighted all of that to be worth it... He was watching the screen carefully, noting the dust, the noise, the frantic rhythm of everything. He'd done *stage tours* that looked less exhausting than this—and Senku had walked straight into it, seventeen steps ahead of everyone else, rattling off a plan before the truck had cooled.

"He wasn't just *watching*," Gen said slowly. "He was… *slotting himself in.* Like he already knew the shape of the machine and was just looking for the right gear to become."

This was part of the mental load that Gen had to share with his favorite scientist, even if it hurt him.

> Rajiv blinked, halfway through a sip from his water bottle. "Wait, you calculated that already?"
>
> Senku shot him a look. "You were taking inefficient notes."
>
> Dr. Okoye let out a low whistle and slapped a folder down on the outdoor desk. "Damn, kid. You're already optimizing us before we've even hazed you properly."
>
> "Please don't, that won't exactly help us get results," Senku shifted uncomfortably, he had heard of hazing on the college level and was pretty sure that it wouldn't be BETTER out in the field. Sounded like a waste of time to him.

Watching from the present, Gen flinched.

It wasn't obvious—just a slight narrowing of his eyes, a faint crease between his brows.

But he remembered. He remembered being the youngest in rooms full of adults who didn't know what to do with him. Professors who laughed a little too hard at the "kid genius" behind his back. Colleagues who thought humiliation was a rite of passage. Who didn't like it when he smiled too much or had answers they hadn't thought of.

Before the charm.

Before the act.

Before he learned how to play *them* instead.

Gen exhaled slowly through his nose, watching the way younger Senku stood stiffly beside the outdoor desk, calculating efficiency like it was a shield.

Luis leaned against the truck, arms crossed. “Tch. How the hell are you this smug after your first day in the field?”

“I’m efficient,” Senku replied, stretching out his arms with a pop. It had been good so far, his brain was settled of all the energy that had built up back home, it felt good, “I was bored in Japan. I’m not bored now.”

Rajiv laughed, shaking his head. “Alright, fine, you get points for that one.”

The team filtered toward the open-air bench just beside the lab—what passed for a break room when the mosquitoes weren’t too bad. Rajiv passed around bottles of lukewarm water, and Luis brought over the beat-up tablet they used for note consolidation.

Dr. Okoye propped a boot up on the edge of the table. “Alright. First impressions, Senku? Besides the fact that the solar panel wiring is criminal.”

“Field setup is underfunded and inefficient, but the local staff are solid,” Senku answered without hesitation. “Sampling priority needs work, but the recordkeeping is surprisingly intact. You’re making it work. I like that.”

Gen went still.

“Oh,” he said quietly, almost under his breath. “He’s *happy.*”

Chrome blinked. “Wait—like, actually?”

Yuzuriha tilted her head, eyes soft. “That’s not the look he gets when he’s proud of a machine. That’s… different.”

Ukyo nodded slowly. “It’s not adrenaline. It’s not proving a point. It’s satisfaction. Like he’s finally where he was *meant* to be.”

“Like a tiger stretching after a long nap,” Ryusui said with a grin. “Dangerous and *so* pleased with himself.”

Francois studied the screen closely. “It’s rare to see him like this. Relaxed. Engaged. Fulfilled.”

That had been a good day, Senku had to admit.

Not because everything went perfectly—it hadn’t. The solar panels were underpowered, the equipment was outdated, the generator made a whining noise that drove him half-mad. But it *worked.* The people knew what they were doing. The science *mattered*. And for the first time in months, his mind had something it could sink into without hesitation. No waiting. No pretending to be “normal.” No faking interest in curriculum he’d already chewed through twice.

He remembered feeling it, deep in his chest.

That strange, feral itch that had been clawing at him since his first journal publication finally going quiet. Like his brain had been pacing in a cage and someone finally left the door open.

He’d looked around at the dust, the wires, the cracked tablet screen—and he *knew*.

He hadn't experienced that feeling since waking up in the Stone World. In some, small, distant part of himself, he wasn't looking forward to the day that they managed to bring most of it back. He wasn't looking forward to that feeling potentially making a reappearance. He wasn't read for it.

Luis let out a grunt that might've been a compliment. "Not bad for a first debrief."

"I'd give that analysis an 8.7," Rajiv offered cheerfully. "Would've been a 9 if he didn't insult the wiring."

"It deserved it," Senku replied dryly.

"Damn straight," Okoye said, cracking open a sealed box of forms. "You're sharp, I'll give you that. Any other suggestions you're just dying to hand out?"

Senku didn't hesitate. "Your data entry program is inefficient. If you switch to a relational model and drop redundant entries, you'll clean the entire set by forty percent. You're also running low on a few reagents—if you don't restock within two weeks, you'll have to pause all hemagglutination runs. Also—"

"*Hah!* Should've known better than to ask *Senku* of all people for suggestions!" Ryusui interrupted with a laugh, throwing a hand up like this was *exactly* the kind of chaos he lives for. "That's not a suggestion list—that's a hostile efficiency takeover!"

Chrome let out a wheezing laugh. "That was more than suggestions, that was a *checklist of doom.* We're super familiar with those."

Yuzuriha gave a half-smile, watching the footage with wary affection. "I mean… he's not wrong. But wow."

Gen pressed a hand to his chest dramatically. "My sweet, socially-limited menace. One day he's going to criticize a global policy just because someone *asked* how his day went."

Because Gen had full confidence in Senku, that man WOULD bring the world back... Which meant that he would be famous probably beyond literally anyone in the history of time EVER had managed to be famous. His words would effect global policies if he wasn't careful, and Senku was never careful. That was for the future them to worry about, however.

Senku, still watching the playback, didn't look away.

But he muttered under his breath with faint satisfaction, "I wasn't even halfway done."

Ryusui grinned. “Of course you weren’t.”

“Alright, alright, slow down, Einstein,” Rajiv cut in, laughing. “It’s like you’ve been working here for months already.”

Senku shrugged, sipping water like he hadn’t just dissected their entire operation.

Luis eyed him for a long moment. “You ever worked in a crisis zone before?”

Senku was tempted to fire something back about how illogical that was, considering his age, but managed to hold that back, if only barely, “No. Unless you consider my home lab to be a crisis zone. My old man might."

“*HAH!* No, seriously—his house was a *disaster zone!* One time I walked in and he’d filled the whole entryway with fog because he was trying to isolate gas density for some experiment—nearly walked into a table and died!”

Yuzuriha nodded, smiling fondly but visibly twitching. “And the time he tried to test heat conduction by running copper wiring through his bathroom heater? We had to stay at *my* place for a week while they rewired the circuit box! Oh, and *don’t* forget the time he built a pressurized chamber out of a vacuum-sealed trash can and almost *imploded* his desk,” Yuzuriha added, ticking it off like a grocery list. “His dad had to call a repairman for the walls.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait, what?!”

Senku didn’t react, still watching the playback, but one eyebrow *did* twitch.

There was a silence at that—brief, but thoughtful. Even Dr. Okoye tilted her head slightly at that one.

“Huh,” she said. “Alright, tell us something weird about yourself. You know, since you’ve already rewritten our schedule.”

Senku leaned back on the bench. *Something weird? He didn't really know what to make of that, so he stuck to what he knew, science,* “I made a centrifuge out of a salad spinner

when I was eight. I used to test water samples from the river near my house and log the bacterial growth rates for fun."

Rajiv stared. "Dude. That's… weirdly on brand with what I've gathered about you so far."

"Also illegal," Luis muttered. "Depending on the river."

From the couch, Chrome immediately perked up. "Wait—*that's* illegal?!"

Taiju blinked. "*What* is?"

"Sampling public waterways without environmental clearance," Ukyo said calmly. "Technically."

"Oh." Chrome scratched the back of his head. "Then I guess I *also* broke the old laws, because I used to boil pond water and throw stuff in it just to see if it exploded."

"*I remember that!*" Kohaku said. "You gave yourself a rash!"

Gen gave a slow, gleeful grin. "Now this is getting interesting."

Yuzuriha raised her hand innocently. "I once used school chemistry supplies to bleach cloth for a cosplay project I wasn't allowed to do. It *was* flammable."

"Elegant chaos," Francois said approvingly.

"I once rerouted a communications signal to broadcast a public callout," Ryusui added proudly. "It was a matter of personal honor and global consequence!"

The room *froze.*

Chrome blinked. “Wait, *what*?!”

Yuzuriha turned in her seat. “What does that *mean?!*”

Gen’s eyes lit up like he’d just been handed a live microphone. “Oh, *do* tell. I can’t decide if that’s a love confession or an act of war.”

Ryusui preened. “Both! You see, there was this private sailing tournament—high-stakes, high-profile, invitation only. But someone—” he sniffed, dramatically wounded, “—had the audacity to *exclude* me from the final roster.”

Taiju blinked. “Wait… but you’re, like, the best sailor?”

“*Exactly!*” Ryusui cried, gesturing grandly. “So I did what any self-respecting heir to the Nanami conglomerate would do—I hijacked a regional weather broadcast and aired a live challenge, complete with satellite-tracked course overlays and an open bounty for any yacht that could outpace mine.”

Chrome’s jaw dropped. “That’s… kinda cool.”

Francois, without looking up from a notebook, said dryly, “The Japanese Coast Guard did not find it cool.”

Gen *cackled.* “Oh my god, did they *arrest* you?!”

“Briefly,” Ryusui said, waving a hand. “But in the end, the broadcast got more traction than the original event. Public sympathy swung in my favor. The tournament folded and *my* course became the new standard. Victory was *inevitable.*”

Francois added smoothly, “He also donated an unmarked sum to maritime safety initiatives shortly thereafter, and the incident was quietly expunged.”

Yuzuriha covered her mouth, giggling. “That’s… actually kinda sweet in a weird way.”

Senku, still leaning on one elbow and clearly not done being judgmental, muttered without looking up, “Rich people really do have different consequences than the rest of us.”

Gen snorted. “What, you mean you’ve never expunged a federal broadcast infraction with a tasteful donation and a photo op?”

“Must’ve missed that chapter in *How to Get Away With Treason,*” Senku replied dryly. “Probably somewhere after the ‘hostile communications reroute’ section.”

Ryusui just grinned. “Jealousy, my dear scientist, is unbecoming.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Senku muttered, but there was a spark of amusement in his eyes now —just enough to show he was playing along.

Gen raised his eyebrows, clearly not about to be outdone, especially after Ryusui's story seemed to have won over Senku, “While, for me I once broke into the psychology department’s EEG lab to run lie detection tests on my professors. Purely academic curiosity.”

Yuzuriha blinked. “Wait, *seriously?*”

“Oh, very,” Gen said, folding his hands together like he was delivering a lecture. “It was during my first year in the grad program. The upper faculty insisted lie detection was unreliable due to cognitive bias in observer reporting. But I’d been designing a calibration model based on *voice modulation and micro-expressions.*”

Senku squinted. “Which means you needed data.”

Gen gave him a dazzling smile. "*Live* data. And what better test subjects than the people grading me?"

Chrome snorted. "That's *insane.*"

"I *know!*" Gen said cheerfully. "I snuck in after hours with a borrowed keycard—thank you, morally flexible undergrad assistant—and ran trials using anonymized questions I *definitely* didn't pull from student reviews."

Taiju's eyes widened. "Did it work?!"

"Oh, flawlessly," Gen said. "Three of them lied about departmental bias. One admitted—under duress—that he never actually read dissertations above fifteen pages. And the head of department? Faked a laugh response in every session."

"*And then?*" Ryusui asked, leaning forward.

Gen twirled a lock of hair between his fingers. "Well, I submitted the results under a pseudonym, and three months later, the faculty board updated their behavioral ethics training module. Which is *technically* a win."

Senku muttered, "You could've just *asked* for a department grant."

"Yes," Gen said brightly. "But then it wouldn't have been fun."

Everyone laughed—except for Ukyo, who looked mildly horrified. When the attention shifted his way, he held up both hands quickly. "I, uh… I don't have a story like that."

Chrome blinked. "Really?"

Ukyo shrugged, looking slightly embarrassed. “I’ve never done anything illegal.”

A beat of silence.

Then Gen gasped dramatically. “*We have a cinnamon bun in our midst!*”

Ryusui laughed. “We must corrupt him immediately.”

“No thank you,” Ukyo said firmly. “I’m good.”

Senku just sipped his water, his mind sliding in everything that Gen revealed still. “Honestly? Keep him clean. Balance is important.”

Sharp mind. Quick logic. That glint in his eye when he unraveled a problem and turned it into a game. The unapologetic way he weaponized knowledge like a scalpel and still smiled through the aftermath. Senku felt a flicker of something deep in his chest. He took a deep breath, this was okay, they had talked about this. It was allowed.

Warm.

Unsettling.

He glanced away quickly—too quickly—and sipped from his water like it could drown the color trying to creep up his neck. *Ten billion percent not the time for that,* he told himself, scowling down into the water like it had betrayed him. But Gen caught it. Of course he did.

His grin didn’t change, but his eyes sparkled knowingly.

“Too much?” he asked innocently, voice pitched just low enough to tease, but the caring was there, the knowledge of their conversation.

Senku didn’t look at him. “Tch. You’re just lucky your experiment didn’t get you kicked out.” *It's fine, Mentalist.*

“Ah,” Gen said, eyes narrowing slightly with amusement. “So you *were* listening.”

Senku muttered something incoherent and rubbed the back of his neck.

Absolutely not blushing.

Gen’s smile widened.

Because Senku *was*.

> “Don’t worry,” Senku said with a smirk. “I boiled it first. I didn't have one millimeter of interest in growing some crazy resistant bacterial strain by accident.”
>
> Dr. Okoye chuckled, and it was the first genuine sound from her all day. “Alright, I’ll bite. You’re sharp, you don’t talk out of your ass, and you’ve got ideas. You might actually survive this place.”
>
> “I intend to,” Senku said, deadpan. “Though statistically speaking, I’ve got about a 94.7% chance of surviving the full field term. Factoring in medical evacuation protocols and average outbreak rates across this district.”
>
> “Wait, you already ran the odds?” Rajiv asked, slack-jawed.
>
> “On the flight.”

Ukyo gave a low, thoughtful hum. “94.7%. That’s… oddly specific.”

Gen made a soft, wheezing noise that might've been a laugh. "He *would.* He absolutely would. I don't know whether to applaud or assume this is some sort of masked anxiety and try to figure out the flavor."

Ryusui let out a *cackle*, clapping a hand against his leg. "That's the spirit! I *adore* when a man knows the odds and goes anyway!"

Senku's eye twitched, he did not even want to know what Ryusui adored.

Francois adjusted their gloves, murmuring, "Calculating survival rates en route to deployment… I daresay, that explains a great deal about your leadership style."

"I had time to kill and my hotspot worked over Kazakhstan."

Luis let out a dry laugh. "Kid's gonna be trouble."

"Trouble I can use," Dr. Okoye corrected, standing and gathering her papers. "Alright, tomorrow's blood draw rotation starts at 0600. You've earned your place for now, Senku. Let's see if it sticks."

She walked off with that, boots crunching in the gravel.

Rajiv stretched, watching her go. "You really impressed her, you know."

"I'm not here to impress anyone," Senku replied, his head tilted to the side, the strand of green hair by his eyes moving a little to the side as he did so. It wasn't that he disliked impressing her, but he was here for more greedy purposes, "I'm here to do the science."

Luis tilted his head. "That's good. Because the real work hasn't started yet."

Everyone started to chat about the different relationships between Senku and the other team members. Taiju frowned a little and decided to move over to his friend. He knew that Senku wouldn't really like that he was going to say this in front of other people, but honestly the only one around that wasn't being loud was Gen. Senku seemed to like Gen so it was probably okay.

“You okay?” Taiju asked, gentle but direct.

Senku didn’t answer right away. Just let out a short breath. “I’m fine.”

Taiju smiled. “That means no, but okay.”

Senku shot him a tired side-eye. “You gonna psychoanalyze me too now?”

“Nope!” Taiju said cheerfully. “I’m gonna say I thought that was really cool.”

Senku blinked.

“You looked happy,” Taiju continued, resting his arms on his knees. “Like, not just ‘hey science is fun’ happy. Like... *settled.* Like you were exactly where you were supposed to be.”

Senku looked at him, the flicker of something unreadable behind his eyes. “You really think so?”

“Totally.” Taiju grinned. “You’ve always been like that. Ever since we were kids. The second you find something *big* to pour your brain into, it’s like—boom. All the noise goes away. You don’t even notice when you stop eating, which is why I had to shove sandwiches in your face all the time.”

Senku scoffed under his breath. “You didn’t have to shove them.”

But then he grinned—wide and real—and Taiju beamed right back at him. A second later, they both burst into laughter. It wasn’t loud or dramatic, but it was *genuine*, and that made it echo louder than anything else in the room. Heads turned. Because *Senku* was laughing. Really laughing. It was the same laugh he’d had years ago, back when it had just been him and Taiju against the world. And somehow, even after everything, it was still in him.

Senku felt something ease in his chest.

He scoffed again, barely hiding the smile. “Get lost, you big oaf.”

Gen smiled behind his sleeve. Taiju really was beyond comprehension.

A week in, and Senku had already mentally rewritten the inventory system, fixed the unreliable humidity sensor, and reorganized their reagent catalog so the biohazards were no longer shelved next to the coffee supplies. He hadn’t told anyone about that last one yet—he was still waiting to see who panicked first when their morning routine got rerouted. He hadn’t gotten bored. Not even once. That alone was enough to tell him this had been the right call.

“—and I swear, if I have to spend one more night with my elbow in a mosquito net seam, I’m going to lose my mind.” Rajiv was complaining again, dramatically fanning himself with a discarded field report. “Why did we even bother with the industrial fans if we can’t use them during outages?”

“Because the lab takes priority for generator output, you drama queen,” Luis drawled, slouched in a chair like he’d been melted into it. “Maybe if you sweat enough, you’ll drown the malaria.”

Senku was at the bench, gloved hands tapping out a new inventory sheet while simultaneously calibrating a spectrometer. They had given him a lab coat of his own, white and brand new, with a patch for WHO on there, as well as a few for their particular area of study, “You could reduce body temperature by about 1.2°C with a properly balanced salt hydration mix, but it won’t fix your net.”

From the viewing room, Yuzuriha’s eyes softened. She leaned forward slightly, watching the way Senku moved with effortless focus, sleeves rolled once at the cuffs, the coat already dusted with signs of use. It suited him—*fit* him—like it had always been meant to be there. The clean white, the emblems stitched into the fabric, the subtle weight it carried. Not flashy. Just *right*.

She bit the inside of her cheek thoughtfully.

Yeah… she could make that.

Maybe not with WHO logos or lab-grade poly-cotton blend, but something close. A new coat. *His* coat. For the Senku who built civilization out of mud and fire, but still deserved to feel like the scientist he had always been.

She didn't say anything. Just filed the image away—one more project in her mental queue

"That wasn't helpful," Rajiv groaned.

"It was accurate," Senku replied.

Dr. Okoye breezed in from the back of the lab, wiping her hands on her coat, her hair up in a messy scarf wrap. "Luis, please tell me you didn't just suggest weaponized sweating as a valid countermeasure. That makes zero scientific sense."

Back in the viewing room, Chrome blinked. "Wait a sec… *Did she just Senku him?*"

Gen laughed softly, one hand tapping his chin. "Mmm, yes. Beautifully clinical and completely unimpressed. Honestly? It's a little uncanny."

Yuzuriha giggled behind her hand. "No wonder they got along so well."

"I'm a logistics guy, not a doctor."

"You're not funny either."

"Tell that to the bleach jug I labeled 'Tequila.'"

Okoye snorted, slumping onto the nearest table. "God, now I wish we *had* tequila."

Chrome leaned forward immediately, eyes lighting up. "Wait—*is this* when he learns how to make alcohol?"

“Distill,” Senku corrected automatically from the corner, voice flat. “Not brew. Distillation’s a separation process. And no, not yet. But close.”

Gen smirked. “You say that like you *didn’t* hear ‘tequila’ and immediately start cataloguing potential ethanol sources in your head.”

Senku didn’t deny it. They were about to see it after all, and Senku was certain that those thoughts had come directly after the first suggestion of alcohol. No time wasted when it came to bribery materials.

Rajiv raised both hands like he was offering a prayer to the heavens. “Oh, for a drink. I would actually sell one of Luis’s kidneys for some real alcohol right now.”

“Bold of you to assume mine would be worth anything,” Luis said. “But yeah. If anyone smuggled a bottle into this godforsaken facility, I’ll give you my next day off to kiss their feet.”

Senku looked up from his sheet just long enough to arch an eyebrow.

“Oh?” he asked, too casually. “Alcohol’s that valuable, huh?”

Gen leaned forward with a grin, tapping his fingers together. “Oh, I *know* that tone. That’s the ‘what-if-I-just-fixed-this-entire-problem-in-an-afternoon’ voice. Run, gentlemen. *Run.*”

Yuzuriha laughed under her breath. “Oh no… they just gave him a reason. You never give Senku a reason.”

Senku, deadpan but satisfied, said from the side, “It wasn’t hard. Just a matter of temperature thresholds, clean containers, and fermentation timing.”

“It’s currency, kid,” Okoye said with a laugh. “Morale booster, bribe, sterilization tool, after-hours distraction. Back in grad school, I watched three biochemists trade lab notes for a bottle of cheap brandy.”

Rajiv sighed wistfully. “And it’s technically not banned, it’s just… discouraged. Because if one idiot gets drunk during sample transport and spills blood on himself, we get shut down for two weeks. If you get your hands on it, fine, but we can't use the supply lines for it. Unlike this guys cigarettes, apparently it's not legal to stop supplying THOSE for some reason.”

“It's not for no reason, we did have some idiot getting drunk on transport,” Okoye added. “Twice.”

Chrome wrinkled his nose. “Man, adults are *so* weird sometimes.”

Taiju nodded with conviction. “Right?! Like, who thinks ‘hmm, I’m transporting dangerous blood samples—better down some whiskey first’?!”

“Unbelievable,” Yuzuriha started—but her voice went higher, more urgent. “No, seriously. That’s how it *starts*. That’s literally the first ten minutes of every zombie movie! Some idiot spills blood in a lab and *boom*, next thing you know, infection spreads, no one listens to the experts, and the whole world turns into *biting corpses with half their faces missing!*”

Chrome blinked. “...Wait. What’s a zombie?”

Yuzuriha turned to him, appalled. “*What’s a—* Oh no.”

Gen leaned back, smirking. “You’ve done it now.”

“It’s—okay, okay—zombies are dead people, *but not fully dead*, right? Like, they get back up after they die. But wrong. Wrong inside. And they don’t talk or think or feel pain, they just *chase you forever* trying to bite you so *you* die and turn into one too. And it *always* starts with a virus. Or a lab leak. Or some guy messing around with a parasite or *fungus* or something and—ugh!” She hugged her knees, visibly distressed. “No. Nope. I *hate* it. It’s the worst idea anyone’s ever had!”

Chrome blinked again. “...Okay, but how do you *kill* them?”

"*You can't!* Or you can, but you have to go for the brain! But there's *so many* and they don't stop and you're always out of ammo and—"

"I didn't even ask that much," Chrome mumbled, overwhelmed.

Taiju nodded, solemn. "She really *hates* zombies."

"I *do!* They're *undead*! I'm sorry, but that is the scariest possible combination of words!"

Off to the side, Senku casually stuck a pinky in his ear, digging at the tiny, stubborn flake of stone he still hadn't managed to get out. "Zombies aren't real," he said flatly, like he'd already checked the math.

"*YET!*" Yuzuriha snapped.

Senku grinned.

That *evil* grin. The one that meant he'd just decided to be terrible *on purpose.*

"Oh?" he said, voice far too casual. "Well, if they were—" He dropped his hand and steepled his fingers. "—we'd be ten billion percent screwed."

Yuzuriha blanched. "*Senku!*"

He didn't stop. "Modern zombie fiction usually assumes high-density cities, right? Well, we don't *have* those anymore. So no containment barriers. No quarantine zones. No high-rise buildings to slow them down. Just open terrain and foot traffic." He tapped his temple, eyes gleaming. "And considering we're barely repopulating and have zero mass communication

systems? One infected person could take out an entire village before anyone realized what was happening."

Chrome looked *way* too excited. "Oh man, and what if they were *fast* zombies?"

"Fast, dumb, and tireless," Senku said cheerfully. "Perfect biological vectors. No higher brain function, so no fear response. No language. Just instinct. And if you wanted to contain it? Good luck—our best option would be physical decapitation or open flame, and we're running low on both fuel *and* steel."

Yuzuriha looked like she was going to *vaporize.*

Gen laughed under his breath. "You're actually *enjoying* this."

Senku smirked, pleased. "Science thrives on hypotheticals."

"You *thrive* on being a menace," Yuzuriha muttered, pulling her knees closer to her chest. "I'm never sleeping again."

Yuzuriha had gone completely still, arms curled around her knees, staring blankly at the wall like she was trying to calculate how fast she could build a fort out of lab equipment.

Senku, still looking far too pleased with himself.

Then Taiju leaned over, gently resting a hand on her shoulder. "Hey," he said, voice soft but solid, the way only Taiju could do. "It's okay, Yuzuriha. Zombies aren't real. And even if they were, I'd protect you, okay?"

She blinked up at him, wide-eyed.

“Even if there were, like, a *lot* of them?” she asked in a tiny voice.

“I’d punch all of them,” he said confidently, not missing a beat. “One by one, if I had to.”

“Even if they bit you?”

“Then I’d wear ten shirts,” Taiju said without hesitation. “Maybe twelve.”

Yuzuriha stared at him another second—then *giggled*, her face scrunching up like the idea of Taiju waddling around in a dozen bite-proof layers was just enough to drag her back from the horror.

“Okay, okay,” she said, regaining her usual sparkle. “If I design you zombie-proof armor, you have to promise to wear it.”

Taiju gave her a thumbs-up so enthusiastic it made her laugh again.

Senku rolled his eyes, but even he looked vaguely entertained.

“Can we *not* reinforce delusions with cosplay?” he asked, dry.

“You started it,” Gen said mildly.

Kohaku, leaning against a nearby support beam with her arms folded, watched the exchange with raised eyebrows and a knowing smirk. Her eyes flicked from Yuzuriha’s sparkling expression to Taiju’s unabashed grinning and back again. The fangirl vibe was strong with this one.

Luis rolled his eyes. “If you want a vice you can start smoking too. Still, I've heard some whispering lately. *Somewhere out there… someone has a flask.* ”

Senku clicked his pen. Thoughtfully.

He already knew how to make it, of course. Fermentation wasn’t exactly rocket science. A few sugar sources, wild yeast collection, the right temperature conditions, a few days of waiting. He’d read every textbook on the biochemical breakdowns of alcohol production before he was ten. And now, after hearing the way *this* group talked—the way their shoulders dropped a little, their voices relaxed a little, just at the *idea* —he started calculating the logistics. How much sugar would they need? How consistent was the climate for fermentation? Would a makeshift airlock work, or would he need to rig up something better?

He didn’t say anything. Not yet.

He just made a mental note to check the storeroom later that night.

“*Smoking?*” Taiju’s voice pitched upward like someone had just kicked a puppy. “Are you serious?! That stuff is *horrible*! It ruins your lungs, makes your breath smell terrible, stains your teeth—*Yuzuriha,* back me up, it’s awful, right?!”

Yuzuriha, mid-giggle, nodded firmly. “Definitely awful.”

Chrome made a face. “Wait, it *stains your teeth*? Ugh, gross.”

Ukyo tilted his head thoughtfully. “Not to mention the long-term pulmonary damage…”

Taiju nodded rapidly. “Exactly! Even just one cigarette can start hurting your body! Why would anyone choose that when there are, like, literally *zero* upsides?!”

There was a beat.

A long one.

Everyone looked toward Senku, who briefly looked like he was about to explode in snickers.

He didn't.

But it was a *close call.*

His mouth twitched, and he cleared his throat with entirely too much composure. "Cigarettes," he said blandly, "Contain over 7,000 chemicals. Arsenic. Formaldehyde. Benzene. You know. The fun stuff. Not to mention carbon monoxide, lead, and ammonia. And don't forget acetone. Nail polish remover. All going straight into your bloodstream via alveolar diffusion."

Taiju looked deeply disturbed. "See?! I *told* you it was bad! Who *chooses* that?!"

Senku kept going, unfazed. "Long-term exposure damages the cilia in your lungs, reduces oxygen exchange, hardens arteries, and increases cancer risk across nearly every system in the body. Also, it makes your fingers smell like you've been rubbing them on the inside of a bus station."

Gen narrowed his eyes. "Why are you in such a *good* mood all of a sudden?"

Senku gave him a smile that was *just a little too innocent.*

"I'm simply enjoying the conversation," he said.

Gen narrowed his eyes. It didn't really fit with what he knew about Senku, but somehow...

Chapter End Notes

Again, blame Ao3 for the fact that you have to wait now. It's all done just waiting for the editing but when I tried to copy and paste it in ao3 said "We love ambission but that's too much" I was like WHAT soooo pissed. Anyway see ya'll in a few days. Remember, it's Ao3's fault that you aren't getting Senku's death in the next chapter.

We ask ourselves, why are the people in react fics so okay with the privacy invasion????

I ask myself, was the progression of Senku too fast this chapter???

Some questions will never have an answer.

Chapter 13: Interlude Three - Ebola Arc Part Two

Chapter Notes

Ebola Arc is officially 3 Parts -- We are almost back to our regular program.

** I have quite a few inconsistencies jumping up in this fic right now this chapter especially I had some ideas for the ending part that I didn't set up earlier in the fic properly. Nothing huge just means what I will set them up a little different than planned.

*** Also sorry about the language thing not being explained sooner. I was tempted to fix it by putting that question in an earlier chapter but I didn't wanna throw that on yall and leave my chapter by chapter readers out of the know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He wasn't getting attached.

He definitely wasn't trying to make his coworkers happy.

That would be ridiculous.

"Damn," Chrome muttered, his eyebrows nearly up in his hairline. "He's even more emotionally compressed than he is now. And that's saying something."

"Compressed?" Ryusui gave a sharp laugh. "That was vacuum-sealed, my friend."

Emotionally compressed, huh.

Senku wasn't surprised they said it. Honestly, it was probably generous. *Compressed* implied elasticity—like there was something in there that could be let out if the pressure got high enough. Like the right moment, the right person, could crack it open. Senku knew better. He didn't store emotions for later. He filed them. Sealed, categorized, removed from circulation to avoid contaminating the rest of the system. Feelings didn't get unpacked—they got archived. Cleanly. Quietly. Forgotten, if possible.

Back then, he told himself it was about efficiency. That caring wasn't scalable. Still told himself that now, sometimes—especially when things hurt.

And if the people around him—his people—were starting to notice?

He tried not to think too hard about that.

Because how did you explain to someone that you didn't always *want* to care?

That sometimes caring felt like a design flaw?

How did you tell someone that without it sounding cruel?

Senku was still thinking about fermentation logistics when the call came in. It was a garbled voice over the shortwave radio, too frantic and too fast. Luis was the first to pick it up, frowning as he translated for the rest of the team in clipped, tight tones.

"Remote village—four hours out. They're reporting a sudden cluster of fevers. Vomiting. Bleeding."

Rajiv's head snapped up from his microscope. "Internal bleeding?"

Luis didn't answer right away. He didn't need to. The pallor on his face was answer enough. Okoye was already moving, shouting orders even as she yanked open cabinets and started stuffing gear into hard-shell cases. "Prep the field kits. Rajiv, get the blood testing coolers. Luis, radio Kampala for a secondary team and transport backup. I want full containment procedures—this sounds like an active zone."

Senku straightened, brain switching tracks without hesitation. The sour chemical possibilities of fermentation vanished as clinical urgency flooded in. This wasn't theory. This was the real deal. And it was happening now.

They were on the road in less than twenty minutes. Senku sat in the back of the transport truck, wedged between Rajiv and a metal cooler full of packed diagnostic tools. The air was heavy with heat and anticipation, the tires churning dust from the cracked red road as they sped through dry, sunbaked stretches of savannah. Acacia

trees blurred by like skeletal fingers. Insects clicked at the windows. Luis drove like he was trying to outrun the virus itself.

Chrome tilted his head at the image on screen. “Wait… is that—he’s *wedged* in there.”

Taiju beamed. “He looks so serious! But also like a little science sardine!”

“*Science sardine,*” Gen repeated, one eyebrow arching as if filing the phrase away for later weaponization. “Trapped between virology equipment and another scientist. A rare and hilarious look for our all-too-serious Senku-chan.”

Kohaku nodded sagely. “And a little cute.”

Senku froze. Slowly—*very* slowly—he turned his head toward her. His expression was blank, but his soul was clearly leaving the planet. The word *cute* in reference to him—*earnest*, not sarcastic—hit like a rogue pathogen to the system. Dangerous. Uncontained. Mortifying. He blinked once, as if trying to reset the moment.

There was a long pause.

Then, flatly: “Ugh.” A full-body shudder rolled down his spine. “Don’t say things like that. Ten billion percent revolting.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait, what part? The compact thing? Or the cute thing?”

“Yes.”

Gen leaned sideways on his stool, voice playful but with that familiar warmth tucked under the mischief. “What? It’s endearing. You looked like you were ready to snap into action, but also like someone shoved a genius into a toolbox.”

Senku wrinkled his nose—but noticeably *did not* shudder this time.

"We'll need to triage fast," Rajiv muttered beside him, reviewing protocol sheets. "If it's hemorrhagic, we don't have time to wait for test confirmation. We go straight to precautionary quarantine."

"How many people are in this village?" Senku asked, gaze steady.

"Two hundred, maybe," Okoye answered from the front. "More if there's a market day. Pray it's not."

The village came into view just as the sun began to dip.

It should've been golden and serene—mudbrick homes tucked along the trees, quiet people moving between them.

But it wasn't.

It was chaos.

People were moaning in the dust. Children clung to doorframes, eyes glassy. One woman stood swaying in place, nose bleeding as she cried and shouted for help. It hit Senku all at once—like an equation written in real blood. This wasn't just lab samples and long-form data. This was real, and it was *ruthless*. By the time they parked, the team was already suited up. Masks. Gloves. Goggles. Okoye moved like she'd done this a thousand times—efficient and terrifying.

"Rajiv, you and Senku handle the diagnostics. Luis, mark the periphery and start setting up a safe zone. We have to identify patient zero and isolate the symptomatic before this explodes."

Senku snapped into motion, his brain eating up everything at once—the airflow direction, the location of the latrines, how many water sources he could see.

Chrome flinched visibly, his hands clenched in his lap. "What… what *is* this?"

He'd seen sick villagers before—fevers, broken bones, even infections that spread fast through the younger kids—but this was different. This was something *ugly*. Something *wrong*. He had found himself comfortable with the idea and belief of science, and still

he was half tempted to fall back on the idea of sorcery when looking at something like this. It looked evil. There was no other way to explain it.

“I didn’t know sickness could look like that,” he whispered, almost to himself.

Kohaku’s expression had gone hard, but not unreadable. Her eyes stayed locked on the screen, as if memorizing every terrible detail. Empathy flooding her, it could have been Ruri, it wasn't the same but sometimes it felt like it was close. All of these people watching their family fade... She understood that, “Their bodies are giving out. Too fast to fight it. This isn’t something strength can help with.”

“Or weapons,” Chrome added shakily. “Or traps or training or anything.”

“They don’t even *look sick* the way we’re used to seeing it,” Yuzuriha said, wiping at her face. “It’s… it’s like their bodies are *breaking.* From the inside. You don't see this type of thing in developed countries usually.”

Gen didn’t speak at first.

Not in the usual way.

When he finally opened his mouth, his voice was softer. Measured. Even. The calm, steady cadence of someone who was no longer speaking as a friend or an observer—but as a professional.

“Mass trauma response,” he said, almost clinically. “You see it in war zones. Disease outbreaks. Places where the system breaks faster than the people inside it. Their brains can’t keep up with what their bodies are doing. Shock makes it harder. The symptoms aren’t just biological—they’re psychological. You can feel the *fear* in that footage.”

Ukyo glanced at him, startled by the shift. Gen wasn’t smiling. He wasn’t deflecting. His whole posture had changed—hands loose, voice leveled, tone precise. It was the voice

of someone walking another person through trauma. Not a voice that Ukyo had ever thought he would hear from Gen of all people, but perhaps he should have expected it after the PhD reveal. Gen may well of dealt with people in a trauma center before - They didn't know at this point.

Chrome looked over at Gen like he barely recognized him. “You… sound like a doctor.”

Gen didn’t respond to that.

Didn’t even blink.

He just kept watching, mouth set in a line that was too composed to be real.

Kohaku's knuckles were white where she gripped the edge of the bench. “I’ve seen people die in battle. This is worse. It’s slow. And they *know.*”

“They do,” Gen agreed, still in that same quiet voice. “And worse—they’re hoping someone shows up in time. But they don’t know if anyone *will.*”

Silence again.

“…It probably didn’t survive,” Senku said.

All eyes shifted toward him. His tone was even—not callous, not detached. Just thoughtful. Grounded in fact. Science.

“I mean the virus. Or at least the worst of it.”

He leaned forward slightly, arms crossed as he stared at the screen, “Ebola’s fragile outside the human body. No long-term environmental resistance. Needs direct fluid exposure. And the petrification…” He exhaled through his nose. “It stopped *everything*. Water flow. Waste. Human movement. That means no sewage contamination. No shared sources. No new infections. Doesn’t mean it’s gone forever—viruses like that can hide in animal reservoirs. Bats. Nonhuman primates. But the human-driven spread? The water systems, the clinics, the blood-to-blood contact... all of that stopped. Cold. Anyone who had it when they were petrified wouldn’t just stop transmitting—they’d *heal.*”

He tapped a finger lightly against his arm, calculating. “Hemorrhagic symptoms, organ breakdown, vascular collapse... the petrification would’ve reset the damage. Clean slate.”

Yuzuriha blinked. “So they would’ve been cured?”

“Anyone who was infected when it hit, yeah,” Senku said, voice low. “If they were already showing symptoms, they’d come out fine. No scarring. No relapse. Just… better.”

He didn’t say *saved*. That wasn’t the word he wanted. But his eyes lingered on the image of the village a second longer than necessary before he leaned back again, “It’s not perfect. The reservoirs might still be out there. But the worst of the damage? The part that spread because of us?”

He nodded once, firmly.

“That died with the world.”

There was a long pause.

Then Gen exhaled slowly. “You really know how to make a mass extinction event sound *comforting,* you know that?”

Senku gave a one-shoulder shrug. “Just logic. Doesn’t change the past. But it does mean we’re not starting over at ground zero. Some things got wiped clean.”

Ukyo nodded faintly, arms folded. “It’s a strange kind of mercy.”

Rajiv handed him a test kit. “You okay?”

Senku’s jaw was tight. “Fine.”

And he was. Not emotionally. But functionally? He was beyond ready. Each patient was another data point. Another piece of the spread pattern. Senku catalogued symptoms, asked about timelines, ran temperature checks. He took blood samples and recorded them with clinical precision. He didn’t flinch when a boy coughed blood near his gloves. He didn’t look away when a girl’s eyes rolled back as they strapped her to a cot.

It was science. And science didn’t blink.

He’d come here for science that *mattered*—and science that mattered always walked hand in hand with death.

And that night, after they’d set up a rudimentary quarantine perimeter and Okoye was muttering into the radio about body bags and vaccine requests, he found himself staring up at the dark Ugandan sky, back pressed to the outside wall of a hut, hands scrubbed red from over-washing.

The stars didn’t look any different here.

They just felt farther away, even though the lack of light pollution made them shine brighter.

“So that was the actual first *real* day on the job,” Senku explained, arms crossed as the footage faded. His voice wasn’t smug, but it wasn’t soft either—just a touch rueful, like the weight of that day still echoed somewhere behind his eyes. “You walk in thinking you’re just there to run numbers. Then the blood hits the dust... Makes sense why so many people threw up on the first day in retrospect.”

The silence that followed wasn’t uncomfortable—it just gave the others a moment to sit with that.

Chrome rubbed at his neck, still staring at the blank screen. “Dr. Okoye didn’t stop for a second, huh? Even after everything. I don’t know how she does that. If I saw that much death all the time…” He trailed off. “But she just *kept going*. Not cold—just focused. Like she *knew* she couldn’t stop. Like if she slowed down, even a little, someone else wouldn’t make it. She probably saved so many people like that. She reminds me a lot of you, Senku.

Gen’s arms were loosely folded, his expression unreadable—but his eyes hadn’t left the screen. Or rather, the space it had occupied. Not really. He was thinking.

Hard.

It was impressive. That was the thing. Beyond the science, beyond the sharp mouth and stubborn spine, *this* was what caught Gen’s attention like nothing else: the way young Senku had taken one look at hell—real, visceral hell—and folded it into data points like he was logging rainfall. He hadn’t flinched. Not externally. It took hours and hours of not letting yourself feel the thing in front of you, until the skill became so sharp it looked like strength. And in a way, it *was* strength.

But it was also a blade with two edges.

Especially in someone that young.

It was a good thing that they knew that Senku made it out considering this was the past.

> The air was heavy even after they returned. There was no cheering in the truck. No relief in the rumble of tires over cracked roads. Just silence—long, weighty silence. The kind that doesn’t ask for words. By the time they reached their base outside Kampala, the sun was up again. The next day had begun, but none of them seemed to notice. They moved like ghosts, unloading the gear, stowing away the samples. Nobody spoke about what they’d seen—what they’d lost.
>
> One of the children hadn’t made it.

Senku noted the fact clinically at first. A new variable. A tragic but statistically predictable outcome.

Then he saw Rajiv sitting alone outside the lab, goggles dangling from one hand, still wearing gloves he hadn't remembered to remove. The man was just *staring* at the ground, eyes unfocused. Inside, Luis was arguing with one of the logistics contacts on the radio, tension in every clipped word. Even Okoye seemed quieter than usual as she double-checked her notes.

It wasn't chaos anymore.

It was *heaviness*.

Yuzuriha stood up.

No one tried to stop her—not even Gen, who glanced her way but said nothing. The screen dimmed a second later, the pause function kicking in automatically with her movement. Still, the silence didn't ease. She didn't leave dramatically. Just quietly—like something inside her had filled to the brim and couldn't hold any more. The door clicked softly behind her.

Outside, she didn't go far. Just to the corridor where the ship's outer light filtered in through a small window. Her fingers trembled a little as she rested them on the frame, staring at the sky. The stars above the Stone World were sharp tonight. Bright. It almost made her angry how beautiful they were—how *unchanged.* Though Senku probably would argue that they HAD changed, but to her, they looked exactly the same, just a little brighter. The same... How could they stay the same when these horrible things happened.

Like they hadn't just watched a child die.

Like Senku hadn't lived through *that* at fifteen.

She tried to breathe through it. Tried to be rational. But the grief came anyway. Soft, silent tears she didn't fight, not this time. Because this wasn't just about the child. It was Senku—her friend, her brother in everything but blood. He'd gone through all of it with no one to hold the weight beside him.

“Yuzuriha.”

Taiju’s voice came softly behind her, and she didn’t jump. She just shook her head.

“I’m okay,” she said quickly. Automatically. But her voice cracked a little, and she pressed her fingers harder to the windowsill.

“I know,” Taiju said gently. “But… it’s okay not to be, too.”

She turned toward him, eyes a little red. He didn’t say anything else—just opened his arms, and she stepped into them like it was the easiest thing in the world.

The corridor was quiet.

They stayed like that for several minutes.

No words. No need. Just the quiet sound of Taiju’s steady breathing and Yuzuriha’s fingertips curled into the fabric of his sleeve. Her tears had slowed, leaving only that hollow, aching stillness in their place. The kind that didn’t need fixing—just understanding.

Taiju rubbed her back gently. “You’re always so strong,” he said after a while. “You almost never cry like that.”

“I don’t like making people worry,” Yuzuriha murmured.

“You’re allowed to,” he said simply. “Especially about Senku, he's... Well... Senku.”

She didn’t say anything, but her fingers curled tighter.

He hesitated.

Then, just as softly, “Yuzuriha… I’ve been meaning to say something. I know this isn’t the perfect time, but—”

“Oi.”

They both flinched.

Senku stood a few feet away, backlit by the low hallway light, arms crossed and eyes flat with his usual brand of perfectly inopportune timing. He leaned against the doorframe like he’d been there for a while and finally decided emotional subtlety was a waste of energy.

“You planning on staying out here all night?” he asked, voice dry. “Because the screen’s paused, and Chrome just tried to unpause it by poking it with a stick.”

Yuzuriha blinked at him.

Taiju let out a weak, awkward laugh. “Senku… maybe give us another minute?”

“Nope,” Senku said flatly. “The reaction room is at emotional saturation levels already. I’m not letting you two have a bonus round out here while the rest of us sit around pretending we’re not dying of secondhand feelings.”

Yuzuriha sighed and wiped her face with the edge of her sleeve. She rallied quickly, years of practice smoothing her back into her usual expression. “You’re impossible.”

“Ten billion percent,” Senku replied, already turning on his heel. “Let’s go.”

Taiju let out a low, breathy laugh as he stood, offering Yuzuriha his hand. “He’s still the worst.”

“But he’s *our* friend,” Yuzuriha whispered, her fingers brushing his before she pulled back, steadying herself.

Yuzuriha and Taiju slid back into their seats without a word, the emotional edge still soft around their expressions. Yuzuriha sat a little closer this time, knees bumping gently against Taiju’s, and he didn’t move away. She didn’t, either. They shared a small, silent glance—quiet, but full of everything that hadn’t quite been said. It didn’t need to be. Not yet. Across the room, Senku dropped down beside Gen with zero fanfare, arms folding with practiced indifference like nothing unusual had occurred.

Gen, of course, noticed immediately.

He glanced between Yuzuriha’s faintly flushed cheeks, Taiju’s too-innocent posture… then at Senku, who looked far too smug for someone with no social awareness. Gen gave a quiet little sigh through his nose and shook his head, lips quirking.

“You interrupted something, didn’t you,” he muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Senku to hear. “Ten billion percent wrong place, wrong time, wasn’t it?”

Senku didn’t look at him.

Didn’t answer either.

But the glint in his eye as the footage resumed was enough of a confirmation.

Gen pinched the bridge of his nose. “You emotional brick of a man. One day, you’re going to kill me with secondhand embarrassment.”

Senku’s smirk widened.

Senku had seen disaster before—on paper, in case studies, in history books. But it had never looked like *this* before. This exhaustion. This slow, brittle unraveling of spirit. He sat outside near the lab’s back door, resting his chin in his palm and staring at nothing in particular. Calculations ran through his head, even now. Always did. But they were slow, blurry, unmotivated. Like a machine running low on power.

Then the screen door creaked open behind him.

“You hit your wall?”

He didn’t have to look. Dr. Okoye’s voice was unmistakable—low, smooth, with that sandpaper rasp that came from years of yelling instructions through masks in sweltering heat.

“I’m recalibrating,” Senku muttered, his voice a little dull to his ears. At least he hadn't thrown up in the bucket he had been given.

She stepped outside, the screen door slapping shut behind her. “Uh-huh. That what you call it when your face looks like it lost a fight with a spreadsheet?”

Senku huffed faintly, but didn’t argue.

She stood beside him for a while, letting the silence sit, before she finally spoke again.

“You know what the worst part of this job is, kid?”

He glanced up at her, red eyes curious but reserved.

“It’s not the blood. It’s not the vomit or the long nights or even the death count. It’s watching your team fall apart. Because if they fall apart, the science stops. The effort stops. *Hope* stops.” She crouched beside him. “You can’t save people if you lose the people trying to do the saving.”

Senku’s voice was calm, but not cold. If anything, it held the weight of someone reminding himself just as much as anyone else, “That’s why we do things the way we do,” he said, staring ahead. “No killing. No bloodshed. Keep the mission clean, keep

people sane. If we fall apart, the work stops. And if the work stops… then so does the hope."

His fingers tapped once against his knee, reflexive.

"Science doesn't stop. Not if we can help it. We keep moving forward. We keep the lights on. We hold the line so hope doesn't flicker out. That's what makes science so great."

The silence that followed wasn't uncomfortable. It was steady. Anchored.

Ryusui gave a low hum, folding his arms with a thoughtful tilt of the head. "That's one hell of a standard to operate by, I can't say I disagree with that way of thinking though. Everyone fill of hope and alive? That's the type of thing I can get behind," he said, and for once, there was no theatrics in his voice. Just respect.

Senku didn't answer. Not directly. He just shifted forward, arms resting on his knees, chin in his palm again, his expression unreadable.

Senku didn't reply, but the words rang in his ears, swirling around his head, accepted as fact and filed away.

Dr. Okoye smirked. "You're not the type who needs pep talks. I get it. You're logic and numbers. But I see how you watch the others. You care more than you pretend to."

"Tch." Senku scowled, trying to look annoyed. "I care about efficiency. Emotional collapse tanks productivity."

"And morale drives output," she shot back smoothly. "Don't forget that. They're not separate variables in this work. Not out here."

Senku didn't admit it, but that *did* land. He watched her stand up again, stretching her arms overhead, the sun glinting off her cracked glasses. "When I was your age, I used to think science could do anything if you just had the brains. These days? I think it's about grit. And maybe… a little bit of bribery."

“You know,” The Mentalist added lightly, “You’re even more alike than I thought. She’s got that dry sarcasm, the unwillingness to suffer fools, that little smug curve to her mouth when she knows she’s right—sound familiar yet? No? I’ve got more. Efficient. No tolerance for sentiment unless it serves function. And still—somewhere under all that—she’s building people up. Watching them. Investing. You don’t notice it unless you’re looking for it.”

Senku gave a quiet scoff but didn’t deny it. His eyes were fixed on the screen like he was trying to memorize every frame. That aching discomfort that had clawed at him earlier was starting to fade, more and more, the longer he sat with this. The longer he realized what a gift it was—getting to rewatch these moments in his life. Annoying as it was that others were watching too, and he was by no means comfortable with it… but slowly, surely…

Plus...He didn’t hate the fact that he was being compared to Ada.

Honestly? It was a compliment of the highest order.

“And the bribery,” Gen added with a smirk. “Can’t forget that. I mean, come on, Senku —*science, grit, and bribery?*—That’s basically your mission statement in the Stone World.”

Senku blinked once. Slowly. But he didn’t roll his eyes or fire back a sarcastic retort. He just… sat there.

Gen studied him.

And then softened.

“The humor, too,” he said, gentler now. “The way she pretends not to care and then turns around and makes sure everyone stays standing. You picked that up from her, didn’t you?”

Senku's breath left him slower this time.

Not sharp. Not irritated.

Just… deep.

He crossed his arms—but not to block anything out. It was more like a grounding point. A physical anchor for something weightless and too big to name. He spoke, his voice quiet, his tone careful, just for Gen, "She was the first person to treat me like I was useful because of how I thought. Not in spite of it. Not like it made me weird. Just… efficient. Even Byakuya, as supportive as he was, made me feel different for it. Which wasn't a bad thing, but..."

Gen didn't answer right away. He didn't need to.

Senku opening up like this—so rare, becoming more common with *him*—made Gen's already-obscured heart do something unfortunate. Because even he could see how rare that kind of validation must've been in Senku's world. And how deep it had sunk in, if he was still carrying it all these years—*and 3,700 of them later.*

"Well," Gen said finally, offering a small, sincere smile. "She wasn't wrong."

Senku looked over at him—just for a second. And for once, his expression wasn't guarded. Not exasperated. Not smug.

It was something quieter. Warmer.

Something that might've said *thank you*, if Senku were the type to use those kinds of words. He wasn't.

But Gen had always been good at hearing things that weren't said.

He took a breath.

No. Nope. Not fine.

Because it should be illegal for Senku to look at him like that. With that tiny flicker of warmth, like Gen had said something meaningful. Like it mattered. Like *Gen* mattered.

Not even a full smile. Not a flirt.

Just… *soft*.

After everything. After that conversation in the workshop where Gen had practically fallen on his own sword, playing it cool, playing it safe, promising to make it *casual*. Gen crossed one leg over the other and rested his chin on his knuckles—all smooth movements and theatrical stillness. But under the surface?

Spiraling.

You're the one who said friends can flirt, he reminded himself. *You're the one who offered the fallback plan. No pressure. No meaning. No harm.*

And now he was sitting here like a man who'd just been hit with a sunrise.

Because of one look.

"Ridiculous," Gen muttered under his breath. "Absolutely criminal behavior. Someone arrest this man for emotional war crimes."

Senku, mercifully, had already turned back toward the screen—none the wiser. Or at least… pretending to be. Gen pressed his knuckles a little harder to his mouth and kept his expression breezy. That was the rule. Keep it light. Keep it smooth. He was so good at acting. Probably the best in this Stone World. One of the best before it, too. So why did it feel like he was bleeding through the lines?

> She smirked, winking.
>
> If Dr. Okoye was right—and she usually was—then improving team morale wasn't some frivolous detour. It was a critical element of continued productivity. An essential mental restoration process. The solution? Simple chemistry.
>
> Alcohol.
>
> Once he had something good? He'd *trade* it—"officially"—for little things. Useless stuff. A rock Luis said looked cool. A bottle cap Rajiv used to fidget with. A crumpled, sweat-stained page of Okoye's old field notes.
>
> The trades would nonsense. Senku found that the thought made him grin. It certainly wasn't logical, what these adults would do for a little bit of this stuff, but it was entertaining.

Gen rested his chin in one hand, eyes narrowed slightly, the rest of the crew still buzzing in disbelief at younger-Senku's soft-hearted bartering.

But Gen wasn't looking at the others.

He was watching *her*.

Dr. Okoye.

The way she'd teased the group about alcohol. The offhanded mentions, the dry jokes, the way she never once *told* Senku to make it—just let the idea settle in the air like smoke and waited for him to catch the scent.

He exhaled slowly through his nose.

“Clever,” he murmured.

Kohaku blinked. “What is?”

Gen’s fingers traced idle circles in the fabric at his knee. “She didn’t *assign* him anything. She didn’t tell him to lighten up, or take a break, or go socialize. She just planted the seed. Alcohol. Morale. Utility. She gave him a *reason* to do it. Let him think it was *his* idea. Though Senku might not fully buy into that type of manipulation... Knowing him, he would still follow through. Which meant he’d throw himself into it, no resistance. No guilt.” His smile tilted, soft and admiring. “It wasn’t just about the crew. It was about *him*. She saw what was coming. The weight. The emotional lockbox. She handed him the perfect distraction wrapped in usefulness. And he ran with it.”

Chrome looked impressed. “Whoa… you think she planned all that?”

“I think,” Gen said, voice low but certain, “That she knew exactly what kind of genius she was dealing with, probably because of the fact that they are so similar to one another. And she played her hand like a master.” He gave a tiny, fond scoff. “Mentalist-approved.”

It had been just over a month since that first real field disaster.

Since they’d stood in that heat-drenched tent watching a teenage girl seize uncontrollably, the whites of her eyes bright against skin already flushed with fever. Since they'd passed gloves hand-to-hand in a blur, each of them moving like parts of a clock that had stopped keeping time. The memory didn’t fade easily.

Senku, of course, had processed it the way Senku processed everything—by pulling it apart. Viral loads, vector spread, the infrastructure gaps in the region’s sanitation system, the response time from transport logistics. Every angle, every failure, every delay. The parts that *could* have been fixed. The parts that *should* have. But he wasn’t the only one hit by it. The rest of the team had carried it, too—and it was starting to show as they moved from site to site. Not as

bad as that first site, but the outbreak was considerable enough to keep them constantly busy.

Luis was smoking more—usually late at night, boots kicked up, staring at the fire like he was trying to out-stare the universe. Rajiv had gotten snappy, his bright energy burning hotter and more uneven. Even Dr. Okoye had quieted a bit. She still led fiercely, but her jokes came fewer and farther between.

Senku had been watching all of this. Cataloguing. A month in and he had a decent ferment created. The recipe wasn't complicated. Sugar, yeast, heat, and time. The tough part was *discretion*—but thankfully, Luis didn't ask too many questions about supply chains when Senku took a few things "for recalibration tests." And Okoye, for all her moral grey, had simply looked the other way once she saw Senku distilling something out behind the side tent and realized he wasn't setting the compound on fire.

He kept the batch modest, but effective. It wasn't pure vodka-grade stuff—he hadn't gone full lab geek on refining it—but it was definitely better than any rotgut they could have gotten from town. Clean enough, safe enough. Just enough to lift spirits. Now, standing behind the table he'd repurposed as a "supply and trade" stand, Senku crossed his arms and raised a single brow at Rajiv.

"So. One bottle of Stone-Filtered Field Reserve, in exchange for your backup instant coffee stash."

Ryusui practically sparkled, eyes gleaming with admiration. "Using *alcohol* as currency! Senku, you absolute *visionary*. This is the *perfect* intersection of human need and economic drive! Limited supply, high morale value, and just enough risk to keep things interesting. You've reinvented the *spirit standard*!"

Senku raised his eyebrow, spirit standard, really? Was that an intentional pun?

Gen cackled beside him, rubbing his hands together like the little chaos gremlin he was. "Ohhh, I am *so* on board with this. Honestly, what's more human than trading fermented hope for caffeine and sanity? This is peak psychological strategy. He's not just raising morale—he's manipulating *loyalty*. I could kiss him."

Senku, deadpan: "Don't."

But his chest was warm and Senku couldn't help the way that his fingers twitched. He's heard this joke a million times but it has never been anything other than disgusting before.

Yuzuriha looked somewhere between horrified and deeply conflicted. “He’s a *teenager*! He shouldn’t be running an underground distillery! This is—this is so ethically questionable I don’t even know where to start!”

Taiju nodded furiously beside her, face pink with stress. “Right?! Isn’t that *illegal* or something? There are, like, *laws* about this!”

Ukyo sighed, one hand pressed lightly to his temple. “Look, I’m not saying it isn’t effective. I’m just saying… maybe *someone else* should be the one regulating access to controlled substances. Someone not still finishing puberty. After all, they did just admit that people misused alcohol. Lets not forget where Yuzuriha got the urge to go into a zombie rant from.”

And finally, Kohaku—watching the reactions quietly, arms folded—gave a low hum of acknowledgment.

“Well,” she said, perfectly even, “That’s our Senku. Some things never change.”

She glanced toward the screen, a hint of a smile curling at the edge of her mouth. She wasn't quick to forget how quickly need became something amazing in Science. Like when you need to make a telephone and somehow that meant that huts had warming machines in them. “Even back then, he was turning desperation into advantage. Same as always.”

Rajiv stared. “You want to trade Alcohol... For coffee?”

Senku smirked. “You’re right. The alcohol’s more valuable. You're lucky you steal all the good coffee or you would have no currency.”

Luis snorted from the shade nearby.

Dr. Okoye, who had just stepped out from the lab tent with a report in hand, raised a brow as she caught sight of the setup. “Are we bartering now?”

Ryusui’s grin widened as he watched the past-Senku name his price like a seasoned black market trader. “You know,” He mused, arms crossed, “The more I see of this version of him, the more I realize just how *ruthless* he really is in a negotiation. Cold eyes. Zero hesitation. I would *hate* to sit across from him at a bargaining table.”

He paused.

Then laughed to himself, low and bright. “Actually—scratch that. If I was at a negotiation table with Senku, it’d mean I was trying to *hire* him. Which would make it the smartest decision I’d ever made.”

Francois gave a rare, quiet smile. “A wise reversal, Master Ryusui. It's always better to place a genius on retainer than to risk competing against him. Might I say, it's just like you.”

Senku didn’t miss a beat. After all, she could pretend she wasn't the one who gave him the idea of she wanted, but he already knew she more or less approved, “Of course not. That would be unprofessional. I’m simply redistributing morale through scientifically approved chemical encouragement.”

She gave him a long look. “...And I’m assuming you had to break at least three protocols to make that?”

“At *least* three,” Senku confirmed cheerfully. “But technically none of them were signed by anyone on this continent, so I consider that a grey area.”

Rajiv finally caved with a dramatic groan, dropping a few packets of his prized freeze-dried coffee on the table and grabbing the bottle. “You are the worst,” he muttered. “This is extortion.”

“Wrong,” Senku said, smug. “This is psychological intervention via fermented carbohydrate solutions.”

Luis lit a cig, already thinking about what he could use to trade with Senku most likely, which was all to plan. His gruff voice sounded just a little softer, “Kid’s not wrong, for all the overcomplicated science jargon all of you use.”

Kohaku let out a huff, folding her arms across her chest as she watched the exchange play out. “Finally! A *normal one!* Someone who’s just sick of all the science talk for once. Nice to see they have a normal person.”

Chrome looked personally offended. “*Hey!*”

She waved him off. “No offense. But alll you science types just sit there and go back and forth for *hours* about fermentation, dilution rates, and whatever anaerobic yields are—” She turned back toward the screen, squinting thoughtfully at Luis. “But that one? He just wants a drink and a straight answer. I respect that. Reminds me of some of the older men in the village.”

> Even Okoye—still holding her clipboard—cracked the faintest smile. And just like that, the tension shifted. A little lighter. A little more bearable. A pressure valve turned slightly off. It wouldn’t fix anything, not in the long run. But it was something. Senku leaned back in the folding chair he’d dragged from the storage unit, chin tilted toward the sky.
>
> The world still sucked.
>
> But for the first time in weeks, the air felt breathable again.
>
> And that?
>
> That was science, too.

Chrome leaned forward, eyes wide as the screen flickered with the last images of the field team. “See? That’s what I mean when I say science changes everything. That’s not just beakers and chemicals—that’s people surviving because someone thought hard enough to make it happen.” His voice lifted with excitement, sincere and fierce. “Back home, half of the children wouldn’t have made it through those first winters without the stoves Senku built. We’d still be losing people to fever without the antibiotics. Even the little stuff—people don’t get sick as often anymore.”

Kohaku nodded beside him, arms loosely crossed. “It’s true I'll admit. We used to fight every day just to survive. But now? Our hunting groups come back faster because we’ve got tracking maps and seasonal data. Our scouts know what weather to expect before they head out. Even our youngest are healthier, stronger. We’re not just tougher—we’re smarter.” She glanced toward the screen again, her voice quieter but proud. “Our tribe is

thriving. That’s because of science. That doesn't mean that I want to listen in on hours of ranting about this stuff though.”

Chrome looked over at her, beaming, easily ignoring the last part in his excitement for science, “It’s like we sparked something that won’t burn out. Even after the whole world turned to stone… science didn’t.”

A quiet snort came from the side.

Senku, who had been half-heartedly poking at his ear in a vague attempt at subtlety, gave up on the charade entirely. Privacy was already a lost cause with everyone rooting through his past. He straightened, then grinned—wide, sharp, and just a little too pleased.

“Yeah. Science really is awesome.”

His voice dropped a little—not quieter, just steadier. More grounded.

“Science is survival. Doesn’t matter if you’re in a stone hut or a high-end lab—if you’ve got the knowledge, you’ve already won.”

Chrome lit up instantly. “Exactly! That whole setup in Uganda? The field rigging, the distillation, the way you handled everything without falling behind—it was genius!”

Senku waved him off with a lazy flick of his hand, though his expression stayed relaxed, even satisfied. “Tch. That’s just applied problem-solving. But seeing what it did for your village?” He paused, just a second. Then added more softly, “That was something else.”

Another month passed. The days were still long, the work still grueling, the outbreaks still unpredictable—but something had shifted. The cases had slowed.

Luis wasn’t chain-smoking through dusk anymore. Rajiv cracked jokes during bacterial sequencing again. Even Okoye had resumed her sharp sarcasm, her edges no longer dulled by exhaustion. Their daily rhythm was faster, lighter. Everyone moved with more ease.

Senku noticed it all. He’d never admit to enjoying the company, not out loud—but he started making larger batches. Different ratios. Cleaner burns. The ethanol distillation process became just another one of his carefully optimized side projects.

Luis had dubbed the newest batch “Field Reserve Mark III.” Rajiv tried to label it “Ethanol Prime.” Okoye vetoed both and just called it “the bottle.” All of them had crude little drawings of Senku on it - It was fun, even though leaving that drawing was like signing off that he did something illegal, it wasn't exactly ashamed of the work considering how much the team seemed to enjoy it.

Senku ended up cornered that night.

Gen groaned first, tipping his head back dramatically. “*Ethanol Prime*? Oh come on, that sounds like a rejected name for a villain’s lair in a B-grade sci-fi flick.”

Ryusui barked a laugh. “And *Field Reserve Mark III*—what is this, a military surplus catalog? I’ve had trail mix with better branding.”

Ukyo nodded, unimpressed. “I’d believe it was a cleaning solvent before a drink. ‘Pass me the Mark III’ doesn’t exactly inspire trust.”

Senku scoffed from where he was sitting, arms crossed. He definitely wasn't offended by the ribbing on his face branded alcohol, “You’re all dramatic. I’ve had worse names slapped on legitimate chemical solutions. At least this one tells you exactly what it is.”

Gen shot him a sidelong look. “And that’s *exactly* the problem. You’re naming a morale-boosting field drink like it’s a component of a nuclear reactor.”

Senku shrugged. “It was accurate.”

Across the room, Chrome squinted at them. “Wait… but *Ethanol Prime* sounds super cool. Like, ultra-scientific. What’s wrong with that?”

“Yeah,” Kohaku added, crossing her arms. “It sounds strong. Isn’t that the point?”

Ukyo gave a patient sigh. “It’s… a cultural thing. Let’s just say if someone poured you a drink and called it *Prime*, you’d think it was going to power a spaceship.”

“I’d still drink it,” Chrome muttered.

Gen chuckled and looked back at the screen. “Well, you would think that you would like to have a good name for a product that you literally put your face on.”

Senku rolled his eyes. They could disagree all they wanted, but if they were going to have alcohol made by him then they would have to put up with the names and branding he choose. (And his alcohol was ten billion times better than the villagers)

“Alright, genius,” Luis said, nudging the empty chair next to him at their firepit. “Sit.”

Senku hesitated, mid-step. “I’ve got to finish testing water samples before sunrise.”

Rajiv rolled his eyes. “No one’s dying tonight. Sit down. That’s an order.”

Okoye, already halfway into her cup, lifted hers toward him in mock salute. “Consider this your final trial by fire.”

Senku gave them a flat look but sat. “You’re all annoying.”

The glow of the playback danced across his features, softening the sharp line of his jaw and the usual calculation in his eyes.

He remembered this night.

Not just the words or the science or the results—but the feeling. The warmth of the fire. The sting of the alcohol on his tongue. The way Rajiv kept pretending to hate everything and still passed him a blanket when the wind picked up. The smell of charred corn and smoke and dust. The scrape of Luis's voice and the sharp bark of Okoye's laughter. The strange, tentative weight of being part of something bigger than science. Of belonging.

His jaw tightened slightly as he watched it unfold.

He already knew what was coming. Knew the jokes, the teasing, the inevitable reaction from the crew around him now. And yeah—part of him wanted to see it. To see their expressions when they realized just how weird and wonderful and *human* this time had been. To see their reactions to some of the more questionable things he had taken part in. But another part of him—

That part was bracing. Already curling inward at the thought of being *seen* like that. Younger. Looser. Softer.

Not because he regretted it. But because it wasn't *theirs*.

It had been his. *His* moment. *His* fire. *His* first team.

And now, they were watching it like it was just another scene in a long list of facts they were cataloging about him. He tried to remember that feeling he had earlier, the feeling that it was worth them seeing it to relive it again himself, but it felt like it was slipping through his fingers. Senku exhaled slowly and leaned forward, elbow on his knee, chin in hand. The corners of his mouth twitched, somewhere between nostalgic and grim.

"Alright," he muttered under his breath. "Let's see how long it takes them to start yelling."

"You're a minor," Rajiv shot back, already pouring. "Let us have our fun."

"Ageism, old man?" Senku retorted, even though Rajiv was only 10 years older than him, which put him at a solid and young 25 years of age.

Luis raised a brow. "You've never had alcohol before, right, kid?"

"*They're going to let him drink!*" she hissed, turning to Taiju with eyes wide in disbelief and immediate judgment.

Taiju flailed, hands up like he was waving away a smoke alarm. "No, no, no, they wouldn't actually—! I mean, they're professionals, right? *Adults!* They know better than to just—just—hand alcohol to a fifteen-year-old genius!"

"Do they?" Yuzuriha whisper-snapped, voice teetering between horror and outrage. "Because it really looks like they're *about* to!"

Senku, on the screen, remained perfectly deadpan. His mouth tugged into a faint, lazy smirk at Luis's question.

Chrome leaned forward, eyes wide. "Wait… is he actually gonna—?"

"Oh no," Yuzuriha groaned, burying her face in her hands. "This is going to be *so illegal*."

Taiju was already sweating. "Maybe it's just, like, a sip! A toast thing! Symbolic! Like having wine in ...Italy?"

Ryusui chuckled, low and dangerous. "If I had a yen for every time someone said a sip before blacking out, I'd own another ship."

"I *knew* these people were bad influences," Yuzuriha muttered.

Senku, watching the memory unfold with thinly veiled exasperation, gave the world's most put-upon sigh. "Ten billion percent of this already happened. Your outrage is useless."

But despite the dryness of his tone, his ears were a little pink again. Gen clocked it instantly. Last time Senku hadn't reacted badly to his more blatant comment, and it was hard to resist. Senku would let him know if it was too far in their little flirty friend agreement... He tilted his head and smiled—just a little. "*Tch*, you're even cute when you're defensive."

Senku froze. Just for a second.

Then—slowly—he turned his head toward Gen.

And *looked* at him.

Not casually. Not absentmindedly. No, this was deliberate. Calculated. Like he'd run a full internal algorithm, decided on the precise angle of his chin, the exact weight of his gaze—and deployed it with surgical precision.

There was nothing accidental about it.

It was slow. Smug. Smoldering.

Senku let his eyes linger, purposefully. Heavy. Intentionally.

His mouth didn't smile, but his eyes did—just barely. Just enough to say: *you wanted to flirt? I can flirt too.*

Gen's soul exited stage left.

Because what the *hell* was that. What the *actual* hell. Senku, a man who once described the *chemical bonding capacity of carbon* with more enthusiasm than human affection, had just looked at him like he'd been trained by seduction demons in a lab. It was uncalled for. It was *illegal*. A war crime in seventeen countries. Gen could probably get it banned at the next international psych conference if he tried hard enough, if those had still existed. When he accepted and talked with Senku about being super casual, friends, no pressure, he hadn't expected he would be getting looks like THAT.

His thoughts scattered like ash in a wind tunnel. He forced a chuckle—light, breezy, almost believable. “Hah. Cute. Real cute.”

And by cute, Gen meant that he nearly choked on his own fucking TONGUE.

Across the couch, Senku watched the reaction ripple through Gen like a data feed. The twitch at the corner of his mouth. The minute shift in posture. The way his pupils dilated just before Gen snapped his expression back into place. Senku had a decent idea of what he was doing. He could calculate molecular decay within fractions of a second—reading Gen was easier than half the equations he solved daily.

That breath hitch?

That finger twitch?

That fleeting dilation?

Perfect.

Perfect.

Senku turned back to the screen, victorious. He didn't smirk. That would've been too much. But he let himself feel it. That buzz of reaction. That warm, low flame of satisfaction that came from still being able to control *something*—even if it was just Gen's carefully curated composure. Which, of course, he wasn't supposed to care about. They'd talked about this. Set boundaries. Made rules—or at least a loosely agreed script that both of them pretended not to rewrite when convenient.

Senku had said it first: no weight. No complications. Friendship. More or less, anyway.

Gen had nodded with that same subtle smirk he used to win card games and defuse threats.

And yet.

Gen was still looking at him like he was an unsolvable equation *and* the punchline to the best joke he'd ever heard. And something in Senku's chest pulled tight.

If Senku was going to consider this an experiment, he didn't know what the results were.

Inconclusive at best.

The moment felt so charged he wasn't sure if he was still following their guidelines. Wasn't sure where the line was anymore. How many variables were starting to slip out of his control.

This would require some consideration.

Senku shrugged it didn't really have one millimeter of interest in such things.

Rajiv handed him the bottle, his grin all too pleased with himself. "Well, I guess it's time for that brain of yours to experience something unscientific. You would experience this in high school anyway probably, if you were still there."

Senku stared at the clear liquid like it had personally insulted him.

Then, with a small scoff and more confidence than was probably warranted, he took a sip.

And immediately choked.

Chrome *burst* out laughing. “He choked! He actually choked! Senku—you *always* act like nothing can touch you, and that little bottle just KO’d you in one hit!”

Taiju was halfway between laughing and panicking. “Wait, wait—was he okay?! That looked like it *burned*! Oh man, Senku! You should’ve waited until you were older!”

Yuzuriha, hands over her mouth, was trying *so hard* not to laugh. “I mean—it’s bad, but also kind of… cute?”

Kohaku tilted her head. “Was that normal alcohol? That looked like something meant to sterilize wounds.”

Ryusui barked a laugh. “Oh no, *that* was moonshine, no doubt. The kind that’s two drops away from powering a rocket. Honestly, I’m more surprised he *only* choked.”

Ukyo smiled faintly, eyes sharp. “It’s strange, seeing him surprised like that. He’s usually three steps ahead of everything.”

The moment—the tension, the weight of *that look*, the chaos it had stirred in Gen's chest—slipped off his shoulders like a dropped cloak.

The laughter hit him just right: cleansing, absurd, grounding. *Thank god*, he thought, not without a grin. *That’s exactly what I needed.*

Because honestly? He was *not* built to maintain both a pretend-casual friendship and the slow emotional fallout from a scientifically engineered flirtation bomb. This? This

ridiculous, awkward, *perfect* moment? It was the reset he didn't know he needed. Gen didn't say anything right away. He was biting his knuckle, visibly fighting back *howling*. When he finally managed to breathe, he wheezed out, "He looked at that bottle like he was about to *murder it*. Oh my god, *that* was incredible."

Senku, sitting nearby and watching the footage with the driest expression known to man, grumbled under his breath, "Ten billion percent not my finest moment."

Gen leaned closer, eyes glittering. "No, no, it was *absolutely* your finest. Your very *best*. I'm treasuring this forever."

Their laughter rolled through the room like a wave—genuine, sharp, unrestrained. It wasn't mocking, not really. It was the kind of laughter that meant *relief*. That meant, for just a second, the weight was off. And Senku sat there, arms folded and deadpan as ever… but his eyes softened.

"Pardon the interruption," Francois said smoothly, voice cutting through the amusement like a silk ribbon. "But I believe the viewing has been paused long enough."

Everyone turned.

Francois stood at the edge of the group with impeccable posture, one brow raised in gentle expectation. Not annoyed, not scolding—just quietly nudging them back on track with that uncanny ability to reestablish order without breaking the mood.

"While I certainly endorse moments of levity," they continued, folding their hands behind their back, "I suspect the device was not paused merely to allow Master Senku the pleasure of being lightly roasted for his inability to metabolize ethanol."

A strangled sound escaped him as he coughed, face scrunching in sharp distaste.

"What the *hell*—did you people seriously keep drinking this on purpose?!"

Luis and Rajiv both burst into laughter.

Across the room, Yuzuriha was still half-giggling—until her eyes caught on Senku's younger self again.

Her smile dimmed a little.

"You're seriously impossible sometimes," she said, her voice softer now. Familiar. The kind of tone that used to scold him when he forgot to eat or passed out at a desk. "I know you didn't even want to drink that. So why didn't you just say no?"

Senku, still watching the screen, gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Scientific curiosity," he replied, unapologetic. "Had to confirm the taste was as bad as the chemistry suggested."

Yuzuriha narrowed her eyes. "That's not funny."

He didn't flinch. Just glanced over, calm and unbothered.

"It's a little funny," he muttered, lips twitching in the faintest smirk.

She sighed—but it was fond. Exasperated in the way only someone who'd known him forever could be. "You know, just because you're good at handling everything doesn't mean you always should. You were a kid, Senku."

He met her gaze for a second longer.

Then smirked a little wider and leaned back in his seat with a slow, deliberate stretch—casual on the outside, but something more focused just beneath the surface. For a second he could feel eyes on him, his mind screamed Gen, and for a second he swallowed before pushing THAT aside.

He absolutely had to have the maximum amount of fun with this.

Because if he didn't?

He'd start thinking too hard about what came next.

So instead of answering her again, he let the laughter of the group carry him—Chrome wheezing, Kohaku snorting, Ryusui howling with one boot kicked up—and fixed his eyes on the screen. He preferred this moment. Preferred remembering the crackling firelight and Rajiv's teasing, the bark of Luis's laugh, Okoye's smirk hidden behind a mug. Preferred watching the Kingdom of Science laugh their asses off at his expense.

Preferred imagining their *shocked* reactions about what was going to happen next.

> Rajiv nearly fell over, clutching his ribs. "*Oh my god*—he looked like someone told him atoms were fake—!"
>
> Okoye snorted into her cup. "That's the look of disillusionment."
>
> Senku wiped his mouth on his sleeve, scowling. "You people have defective taste buds. I distilled this better than most back-alley vodkas and it *still* tastes like fermented battery acid."

Chrome blinked. "Wait—battery acid? Is that like nitric acid?"

"Worse," Gen said, with a dramatic shiver. "It's like if regret and corrosion had a baby and that baby was *also* a war crime. Senku-chan can probably explain it better."

Senku didn't even blink. "Battery acid is sulfuric acid. H_2SO_4. Industrial-grade, highly corrosive, and dense as hell. It doesn't just burn like nitric acid—it *dehydrates* organic material, strips electrons, and basically cooks anything it touches from the inside out. Nitric acid's got a sharp bite and a flashy reaction, sure, but sulfuric's slow and brutal.

You don’t want it on skin, and you *definitely* don’t want it near your mouth.” He glanced toward the screen, lips twitching as he remembered doing just that. A little bit of himself he hadn't expected to come out today but hey, more fuel for the fire.

Kohaku frowned, serious now. “So it’s *not* the kind we use for refining metals.”

“God, *no,*” Yuzuriha groaned. “You’re not even supposed to *touch* it without gloves!”

Ukyo gave Senku a sidelong glance. “You haven’t… actually *tasted* it, right?”

There was a long pause.

Senku gave a maddeningly casual shrug. “Wouldn’t recommend it.”

“*SENKU!*” Yuzuriha shrieked.

“WHY IS THAT NOT A NO?!” Gen howled. “You’re supposed to *say no!!*”

Taiju looked like he was trying to physically rewind time. “You’re a genius! Why would you put battery acid in your *mouth?!*”

Chrome squinted. “Okay, but like… is it more sour or more bitter?”

“Battery acid isn’t *juice,*” Yuzuriha snapped.

Senku took another sip of his own brew, completely unfazed, looking like the world's most insufferable mad scientist.

Senku didn't flinch. Just raised an eyebrow like *they* were the weird ones.

"I was eleven," he said flatly. "It was a controlled experiment."

Yuzuriha made a noise like she was going to combust. "CONTROLLED?!"

Gen slapped a hand over his own mouth, wheezing. "Please, *please* tell me you didn't drink it on purpose—"

Senku gave a put-upon sigh, clearly irritated by the assumption. "Don't be stupid. I used a cotton swab. Trace application on the tongue. I was testing reactivity between salivary enzymes and diluted sulfuric residues. I *spat* it out."

"*SPAT IT OUT?*" Yuzuriha shrieked.

Ukyo looked genuinely nauseous. "That's… still ingesting battery acid, Senku."

Taiju had his hands on his head, pacing like he could out-walk the mental image. "You were a *child!*"

"I was a *scientist,*" Senku snapped lightly with rolled eyes.

Chrome stared at him, half-awed and half-horrified. "So… like, on the pH scale, was it more acidic than stomach acid or less?"

Kohaku blinked. "Didn't you say that stomach acid can melt meat?"

"Battery acid can melt *metal,*" Yuzuriha shouted. "HE *PUT IT IN HIS MOUTH!!*"

Gen, for once, didn't have a comeback. He just leaned forward, hands folded over his mouth, and stared at Senku like he was seeing him for the first time. Slowly, carefully, he whispered, "And *I* thought *I* had self-destructive tendencies."

Senku took another sip of his fermented concoction, completely unfazed. "You're all overreacting. I neutralized it with a basic rinse immediately after."

"Stop TALKING," Yuzuriha begged.

Ryusui was shaking with laughter, tears in his eyes. "I'm just impressed you lived long enough to revive the rest of us."

Francois cleared their throat, professional as ever. "If I may interrupt this deeply alarming information—perhaps it's time we return our attention to the screen?"

Senku smirked, red-eyed and smug. "Ten billion percent. Can't wait to see what else I did that gives you people an aneurysm next. Also Chrome, as for your questions, Sour. Like, melt-your-face-off sour. Acids trigger the sour receptors on your tongue—battery acid included. But this isn't lemon-juice sour. This is 'your nerves are screaming, your taste buds are dying, and your enamel is dissolving' sour. Also, Battery acid—specifically sulfuric acid usually, funnily enough—usually sits around a pH of 0.8 to 1. Real nasty stuff, as you know. Stomach acid, which is mostly hydrochloric acid, ranges between 1.5 and 3, depending on when you last ate."

Chrome's jaw dropped. "Wait—*sulfuric* acid?! Like the kind I almost fell into that one time?!"

Senku's smirk didn't falter. "That'd be the one."

Chrome stared at him like he'd just confessed to licking the inside of a volcano. "You *tasted* something that's *stronger* than stomach acid?! That burns *rocks*?!"

“Only once,” Senku said with maddening calm. “For science. You might have wanted to do it more if you didn't have me to answer these questions. It's scientific curiosity. You would have gotten there too Chrome."

Chrome certainly didn't think so.

Luis handed him a cup of water, still smirking. “Welcome to adult disappointment.”

Senku took the water and gulped it down. “No wonder none of you function before ten in the morning.”

“You’ll build a tolerance,” Rajiv wheezed. “...Or die trying.”

Okoye lifted her cup again. “To chemical coping mechanisms and fieldwork psychology!”

Luis and Rajiv echoed the toast. Senku rolled his eyes but leaned back against his seat anyway, the firelight dancing across his narrowed gaze. He wasn’t drunk—barely even buzzed—but something in his chest felt warmer than usual. Less like fire, more like friction—steady heat from gears running in sync.

Maybe it wasn’t just ethanol chemistry at work.

Luis lit a cigarette with practiced ease, exhaling a slow plume of smoke into the night air. The fire crackled between them, casting orange light across their faces. It was one of the rare evenings when no one was dead-tired, bloodstained, or elbows-deep in a microscope. He glanced at Senku, who was still eyeing the bottle they’d passed around earlier like it was some kind of scientific relic.

“You already tried the rotgut,” Luis said. “Wanna see how the other half lives?”

“Oh no,” Yuzuriha muttered, already bristling. “Don’t you dare—!”

But Chrome burst into laughter, half-sprawled across the couch. “Wait, *wait*—is he really gonna try it? That’s so dumb! I mean, it’s *Senku*, but still!”

“Ten billion percent,” Ryusui drawled, amused. “This kid’s taking ‘try everything once’ to dangerous new heights.”

Gen gave a low, wheezing laugh. He was realizing now Senku's reactions to a few things earlier, that sly bastard, “I know it’s morally complicated but I’m so curious—does he do it *right now* or later? It's Senku so obviously the answer is yes. Probably a mix of 'for science and the urge to try new things to keep his brain running. He might take one and not smoke it with them though, he is a little... socially inept."

Even Ukyo cracked a small smile. “For science, huh? That *is* very Senku.”

Taiju winced but tried to play it off. “Maybe it’s, like… just a *puff*. Not even a full inhale. Maybe he spits it out. Right?”

“Unfortunately, Monsieur Taiju, that is *not* how cigarettes function. The primary mechanism of nicotine absorption requires combustion. One must inhale the smoke to achieve the intended pharmacological effect," Francois interrupted, their tone curt and factual.

Taiju blinked, processing.

“…So you *have* to breathe it in?”

“Unless he is attempting to ingest the filter—which I do not recommend—yes.”

Yuzuriha let out an offended squeak. “Gross!”

Her arms were crossed, her brows furrowed, and her foot was tapping against the floor —aggressively. “It’s not funny,” she muttered under her breath, too quiet for most of the group to hear. “He didn’t even like the drink, and now this? This is just—he didn’t *want* to—he’s just—” She stopped herself. Clenched her jaw. Sat back, eyes hard on the screen.

Ryusui cackled, tipping his head back. “If you’re lucky, you cough once and hate it. If you’re *Senku*, you probably start quoting combustion rates while inhaling the carcinogens.”

“Ten billion percent,” Senku said with a grin, “The combustion rate was *absolutely* one of the first things I calculated.”

Yuzuriha huffed again, crossing her arms with the full offense of someone personally betrayed by combustion. “It’s not even *cool,* you know! People die from that stuff all the time! And you already don’t take care of yourself!”

Senku didn’t answer at first.

Instead, he turned toward her—just slightly—and gave her a look. Not smug. Not teasing. Just soft. That rare, fleeting kind of softness that only ever made it to the surface when she was involved. It lasted a second. Maybe two. Then he looked back at the screen, tone as dry as usual. “Ten billion percent I’ve breathed in worse things. Ever heard of methyl bromide? Or any of the solvents in early-phase rocket fuel? Besides…” He lifted one shoulder. “Petrification probably scrubbed all the damage clean. Like rewinding lungs back to the default settings.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait, seriously? You were breathing in rocket fuel?”

Gen muttered, “That explains so much, actually.”

He held the cigarette out between two fingers.

Rajiv gave a warning noise through his teeth. “Are we corrupting the teen genius with cancer sticks? Isn't that a little too far?”

“Oh thank *you!*” she said, throwing her hands in the air like the voice of reason had finally arrived. “Someone else finally gets it! You people let him drink and now this?! What’s next, throwing him into a chemical fire for fun?”

Luis shrugged. “Strictly speaking, I don’t think *any* of this is allowed. Plus, the kid already knows all the statistics, he can choose what he wants."

Senku took the cigarette. It was said you could get addicted to these things pretty easily.

Roughly 32% of people who try smoking even once go on to form a long-term dependency, his brain supplied automatically. *Nicotine hijacks dopamine reward circuits—modifies behavior faster than most substances of its class. Especially when paired with stress.* He turned the cigarette in his fingers, studying the roll, the filter, the way the paper flaked slightly at the seam.

Taiju flailed his hands, halfway between outrage and panic. “Senku! That’s so bad for you! Plus it's upsetting Yuzuriha!”

Ukyo didn’t speak right away. He had many coworkers who were smokers when he was in the Navy, all of them young, most of them who had started in high school. It wasn't something that Ukyo supported of course, but it wasn't the end of the world. Especially since it was LITERALLY the end of the world and there definitely wasn't any left for their favourite scientist to smoke. He just studied the image on the screen, before shrugging, “He knows. That’s what makes it worse. If Senku’s still doing it, even after running the numbers in his head… he’s made peace with it.”

Ryusui laughed under his breath, sharp and amused. “He’s calculating a vice of all things. You can *see* it. That’s the face of a man who's weighing personal risk against sheer curiosity. Personally, I have never turned down my curiosity when it comes to something I want to try! More power to you!”

Francois tilted their head, arms folded, perfectly composed. “I’d rather he didn’t, but… he is of sound mind. Fully informed. Choosing of his own volition. It’s hard to argue with autonomy when it’s wielded that precisely. If it were any other fifteen year old I believe my opinion would be different. Though I do suppose that his brain is not yet developed completely..."

“Neural development finishes around twenty-five, sure. But the brain doesn’t run on a fixed schedule. Especially not when environmental stressors demand accelerated adaptation.” He tapped two fingers lightly against his temple, “I wasn’t making

decisions with a half-formed brain. I was making decisions with a high-functioning one that had already been forced to prioritize growth, efficiency, and long-term calculation."

He looked over at Francois then, direct but not confrontational, "And if autonomy's only respected when the person *looks* like they're ready, then it was never autonomy to begin with."

His voice didn't rise. It didn't sharpen. But the logic had weight to it—the kind that didn't leave much room for sentiment.

Francois inclined their head, neither agreeing nor retreating, simply accepting the point as presented.

"I see," they murmured. "A rather Senku-esque rebuttal."

"

Yuzuriha, however, was not having it. "You *know* it's dangerous, and you're still going to—? Senku!" She looked horrified, almost betrayed. "You literally built a clean water system from scratch! Why would you *do* this?!"

Senku finally rolled his eyes, "You're all late to the outrage. This already happened and any damage is already healed."

"I've already fucked up my lungs," He muttered, inspecting it. "For the data."

Luis raised an eyebrow but handed over the lighter without comment.

Senku lit the end and took a drag.

No coughing. No gagging. Just a measured inhale, a brief pause… and a slow exhale of curling smoke that trailed like chemical lace through the air.

Rajiv stared, slack-jawed. "You *seriously* didn't choke?"

Ukyo raised his brows slightly. "That's… rare. Most people don't manage a clean first drag unless they've been exposed to smoke before."

Francois gave a quiet hum, eyes narrowing in faint analysis. “Even with prior lung damage, that level of composure suggests intentional conditioning. Either he practiced ahead of time—or he simply has some other smoke inhalation that happens frequently.”

"Senku,,," Yuzuriha muttered, sounding disappointed. Honestly she was more disappointed than Byakuya would be, which Senku honestly found a little bit touching and a little bit funny.

Senku just watched the screen from his place on the couch, jaw propped lazily in one hand. He watched as people had their varied reactions completely unmoved other than vague humor that lit up within him. He definitely never regretted it, that was a special moment for him, he had liked being there with them, and he hadn't actually had that 'Have one and you're addicted for life' moment, so yeah, he was unmoved by any sort of regret.

Gen, however, was deeply *moved.*

He watched the screen, lips parted, eyes fixed. But what he saw wasn’t the same.

Because somewhere between that clean drag and the way Senku tilted his head against the firelight, *Gen’s mind betrayed him completely.*

The memory warped. It wasn’t teenage Senku anymore. It was *current* Senku. His height. His shoulders. The faint lines at the edge of his eyes from too many sleepless nights. The muscle in his jaw when he clenched it between thoughts. That older, sharper, rougher edge he wore now like armor—and *still—Still* with a cigarette between his fingers. Still letting smoke trail out of his mouth like he *owned* the night.

The scene twisted in his mind again—Senku in one of Ryusui’s stolen button-downs, sleeves pushed up, firelight bouncing off his cheekbones, an absent little smirk curling just beneath the smoke. Gen imagined him leaning against the hull of the Perseus, all laziness and deadly intent. Hair wild from wind, wilder than it already was, the wind blowing it more back, flying it into his face. Red eyes half-lidded. Looking at Gen like he was a theory worth testing and the test was going to take *all night.*

Gen blinked.

Then blinked again.

Then crossed his legs a little tighter.

“Fucked,” he said out loud, with a brittle smile, “I am so absolutely fucked.”

Ryusui raised a brow.

Gen did *not* answer.

Because no one needed to know how deeply his psyche had just rewritten the last thirty seconds of footage into a full-blown *black-and-white film noir moment*, complete with low jazz and button-popping tension.

Across the couch, Senku scratched at his ear.

And Gen *nearly died*.

Illegal. Unfair. Unscientific. And now I have to pretend I’m fine while everyone else just saw me imagine that entire scene with current-day Senku and a cigarette like he was a damn Bond villain. This is exactly how mentalists lose their credibility.

He licked his lips. Smiled breezily.

Did not look at Senku.

He just sat there. Staring at the screen. Then at the floor. Then briefly at his own hands like they might have answers.

Because *what the hell* was that. Ignoring it wasn't going to make it make SENSE and Gen needed it to make SENSE.

Why—*why*—had his brain decided that *cigarette-smoking Senku* was attractive?

He *knew better*. He had *researched this*. Literally run cognitive studies on the long-term psychological effects of romanticizing vice aesthetics in controlled social groups. *He had published on this.* He had stood in front of entire grad-level psych classes and explained—*with slides*—how pop culture had conditioned people to associate rebellion, composure, and slow-motion exhaling with some kind of unattainable allure. It was performative. It was curated. It was *fake*.

And yet.

And yet.

His brain had taken one (1) image of Senku smoking and gone full *neo-noir delusion*. Suddenly Senku was lounging in a post-apocalyptic speakeasy, talking about half-life decay with a gravel in his voice and physics in his pants. It wasn't fair. It wasn't *right*.

"I blame Hollywood," Gen muttered under his breath.

Because seriously—*what kind of messed up visual programming* made his entire brain short-circuit the second Senku got a little firelight on his cheekbones and held something dangerous between his fingers? Cigarettes were gross. They *smelled*. They stained your teeth. They raised your risk of atherosclerosis and respiratory illness by statistically significant margins. They were a chemical crutch tied directly to addictive reinforcement cycles. He had literally *run EEGs* while people smoked to measure dopamine spikes.

And still.

Senku in a lab coat and firelight with cigarette smoke curling from his lips?

Yeah. Apparently his brain was trash now.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. Senku, oblivious to the spiral happening two feet away, let out a questioning hum and leaned back with his usual lazy sprawl to look at Gen.

Gen didn’t look back.

Because he was already at critical damage.

> Senku tapped a bit of ash off the end, tone dry. “Like I said, I've already fucked up my lungs. I’ve inhaled powdered lithium and spent a week purifying sulfur fumes in a box the size of a shoebox. This is basically aromatherapy.”
>
> Luis let out a surprised huff of laughter. “Yeah, alright. You’re terrifying, kid.”
>
> Senku ignored them, taking a second drag—shorter this time, more for calibration than curiosity. His brain was already sorting variables: nicotine concentration, possible additives, combustion heat, airflow.

Yuzuriha stared at the screen, her expression caught somewhere between scandalized and exhausted. “I *want* to be mad that you kept smoking it,” she said slowly, “but you *also* just told us you inhaled powdered lithium and sulfur gas in a shoebox, so now I don’t even know what to be concerned about anymore.”

Ukyo scratched the side of his head. “Well well... gotta say he’s not wrong about that aromatherapy comparison. Cigarettes are practically spa treatment compared to that.”

Gen covered his mouth, trying—and failing—not to laugh. “I think I just realized my baseline for what counts as ‘normal teenage rebellion’ has been permanently destroyed.”

“Exactly. Comparatively low risk. And *very* effective for atmospheric chemistry studies.”

“Atmospheric chemistry—oh my god,” Yuzuriha groaned. “That is *not* a valid excuse!”

Senku’s smirk twitched at the edges. “Didn’t say it was. Just accurate.”

Gen leaned back with a theatrical sigh. “I’d say ‘he’s hopeless,’ but honestly? That’s kind of the charm.”

Yuzuriha threw her hands in the air. “That is *not* the word I’d use!”

She absolutely needed to step away, to get some of this anxious energy out. She was worried about her all but brother and he wasn't making it easy, grinning like it didn't matter. She stepped toward the back of the room everyone seemed to realize that they were going to take a little pause because they found their own conversations in the mean time. Yuzuriha threw her hands up, pacing in a small, frustrated circle. Her complaints came out in a hushed whisper, “He *shouldn’t* be okay with this! Just because he’s done worse things doesn’t mean this one’s fine. It’s still his body! His lungs! What if it *did* damage something permanent and—”

She broke off, eyes wide, shoulders tight with worry she couldn’t quite put into words. Her fingers fidgeted at the hem of her shirt, twisting fabric in her hands like she was trying to wring the tension out of herself.

Taiju stepped up beside her, quiet at first. Then—gently—he offered her a hand.

“Hey,” he said softly, his voice the kind of steady that didn’t push, didn’t prod—just held. “I know. I get it. It’s scary to think about what he’s been through. And it’s even

scarier that he doesn't think twice about it. But... that's just how Senku is."

Yuzuriha looked up at him, eyes still wide with concern.

"But he's *here*, right?" Taiju continued. "He's still standing. Still arguing. Still pulling off crazy plans and keeping all of us going. Whatever he did to survive back then—he made it through. And now we get to be the ones who look out for *him*."

Her hands stilled.

"And if it ever gets to be too much," Taiju added with a little smile, "You're not alone in worrying about him. I've got your back. Always have."

Yuzuriha's breath hitched—but she nodded. Quiet. Grateful.

"…Thanks, Taiju."

Senku didn't mean to listen. (He also didn't *not* mean to.) Yuzuriha's voice wasn't exactly loud, but it carried just enough through the low hum of the room, just enough over the crackle of the playback audio to catch his attention: "You're not alone in worrying about him. I've got your back. Always have."

Senku froze.

And he wasn't the only one.

Beside him, Gen's fingers slowed their half-minded shuffling, the corner of his eye flicking toward the direction of Taiju and Yuzuriha's hushed conversation. They were curled just behind the main group, soft-edged and glowing with that steady, quiet kind of affection—the kind that didn't need announcements to be obvious. Obvious to everyone other than the pair themselves.

Senku didn’t turn. Just muttered, too low for the others to hear, “They’re doing it again.”

Gen’s grin unfurled slowly, like a magician revealing the first card of a trick. “Mm. And you’re making that face.”

“What face.”

“The matchmaking face.”

“There is no matchmaking face.”

“There *is*, and you’re wearing it. The same one from that 'love potion' moment."

Senku glared at the screen like it had personally betrayed him.

Gen leaned in slightly, not enough for the others to notice, just enough for Senku to hear the amusement in his whisper. “It's hilarious how hard you play at hating this stuff.”

“I do, it's not play."

“Do you? Because I’m getting the distinct sense you’re about to build a psychological mousetrap around two of our best friends.”

Senku clicked his tongue, they were clearly too bored if they had so much time to focus on him, “They’re *begging* for it. Someone has to intervene.”

Gen’s eyes sparkled with smug delight. “Ah. So now you’re pro-romantic meddling. Should I go ahead and log this emotional growth for our not-a-relationship record?”

Senku didn’t respond. Not *out loud*. But the way he narrowed his eyes and muttered something under his breath about “statistical inevitability for *those* two idiots” and “emotional bottlenecks” told Gen everything he needed to know. If he had to guess, Senku was probably too far in his plans to have even heard Gen's comment. Also, it was crazy for Senku of all people to call someone emotionally bottlenecked.

“Oh no,” Gen drawled, biting back laughter. “You’re *serious*. You’re really about to go full matchmaker on them. The Senku Ishigami. King of Emotional Avoidance. Playing Cupid.”

“They’re the ones being embarrassing,” Senku muttered.

“You say that, but I seem to recall someone giving *me* a look earlier that all but broke the Geneva Convention.”

Senku didn’t rise to the bait, though he did look at Gen heavy, a pale comparison, but it still made Gen's breath hitch. *Unfair.*

Which, of course, was its own kind of answer.

Gen smiled wider, settled back into his seat, and steepled his fingers like he was settling in to watch the world burn. They were a partnership in these schemes if nothing else, “Alright, science boy. If we’re doing this, we’re doing it together. Strategic timing. Calculated insinuation. Coordinated disruption. We plan our moves at our next break."

Senku finally smirked. “Ten billion percent.”

And across the room, Taiju and Yuzuriha continued talking quietly, completely unaware that the two most dangerous minds in the Kingdom of Science had just declared open

season on their feelings.

Poor souls.

They never stood a chance.

Yuzuriha and Taiju slipped quietly back toward the main area of the room, heads ducked just slightly—like they knew they'd been gone longer than they'd meant to. The others hadn't moved much; the screen was still paused, the lights still dimmed for clarity. A few of the crew were stretching their legs or sipping water, the usual lull between scenes that had started happening. But two people were watching them a little too closely. Gen, legs crossed and fingers laced under his chin like a polite demon, tracked them with a look that was far too amused to be innocent. And Senku—who was not usually one for emotional theatrics—was barely pretending to disguise the way his eyes narrowed the moment they entered his field of vision.

Yuzuriha slowed a little. "Um… did we miss anything?"

"Nope," Senku said smoothly, the syllable crisp as snapped copper wire.

"Not a thing," Gen added, smiling like a cat with its paw already on the mousetrap trigger. "We were just—waiting."

Taiju blinked. "Waiting… for us specifically?"

"Oh, no," Gen said. "Merely observing the return of two deeply trusted comrades. Purely observational."

Yuzuriha squinted. "You're smiling too much."

"I smile all the time," Gen replied breezily.

“Not like that,” she muttered.

The two of them sat down slowly—Yuzuriha beside Chrome and Taiju beside Ukyo—but they both *felt* it. The *watching*. The silent commentary behind Senku’s narrowed eyes and Gen’s too-charming grin.

> *Addiction risk increases with repeated exposure. But also correlates strongly with impulse-seeking behavior.*
>
> He exhaled through his nose. The burn was faint, the dopamine hit barely noticeable. Still… comforting, in a way. Mechanical.
>
> Predictable.
>
> He cataloged it.
>
> “That,” Rajiv muttered, “Was way more concerning than if you *had* hacked up a lung.”
>
> Luis laughed quietly and leaned back against the log. “Kid’s gonna outlive all of us.”

Ukyo was starting to look seriously worried, lips pressed in a flat line. Yuzuriha was half out of her seat again, mouth already open to spiral. But Gen, thoughtful as ever, lifted a hand before the alarm bells could really start ringing. “Hmm… I’d say it’s a little concerning,” he mused, fingers steepled lightly beneath his chin, “But comforting after one cigarette doesn’t a habit make.”

He glanced sideways, already knowing exactly where to look. “Of course, the easiest way to settle the debate once and for all is to ask the man himself.”

He turned to Senku, expression open and mildly amused. “Well? Did you get addicted or not?”

Senku signed, dug in his ear a bit and hoped he wasn't about to hear from Yuzuriha again for this. Gen's plan was probably to calm her, but Senku wasn't sure if his answer would,

“Smoked socially a few times with Luis after this. Never on my own. Don’t intend to either.”

Yuzuriha blinked. “Wait—really?”

“Ten billion percent,” Senku said dryly. “Besides, the cigarettes they had were filled with additives—burn accelerants, ammonia compounds, formaldehyde. *Disgusting.* If I *were* to smoke consistently, it’d be in a world where we grew and cured raw tobacco ourselves. No filters. No chemicals. Just *Nicotiana tabacum* leaves dried properly, maybe cured with a bit of honey or molasses to smooth the flavor.”

He tilted his head, getting a little more animated now, slipping into science mode as he continued, “Unadulterated tobacco actually burns at a slower rate and produces fewer particulates. It's still not *healthy*, but compared to modern cigarettes, it’s closer to… I don’t know. Chewing willow bark instead of taking aspirin.”

Gen let out a low whistle, clearly impressed—and amused. “Of course you have a *preferred method* of hypothetical smoking.”

Taiju blinked. “Wait, did you just make cigarettes sound… *organic*?”

“I mean,” Ryusui grinned, “In the Kingdom of Science, *we* control the ingredients. Makes you think. We will have people who wake up wanting their fix, I'm not against giving them a healthier alternative before they screw themselves looking for the old stuff."

Francois sighed. “Let’s not make artisanal tobacco a priority, please.”

Yuzuriha slowly sat back down, still giving Senku the side-eye. “Okay. Fine. Still don’t like it.”

Senku just shrugged. “Good. I’m not trying to sell you on it.”

Gen chuckled to himself, relaxing back into his seat. *Crisis averted.* Sort of. Probably. For now.

> Senku didn't answer. He just stared up at the stars between curls of smoke, letting his brain calm down—just a little. The alcohol had warmed his chest, dulled the ever-turning gears for a second. But this? This was quieter. Less messy. Predictable. He glanced at the cigarette again, mentally cataloging its burn rate, the acrid-sweet tang, and the lack of resistance in his lungs.
>
> Definitely easier than sodium hydroxide.

"…Sodium *what now*?" Chrome asked, blinking. "Is that one of those acids?"

"It's a base," Ukyo corrected, slowly, his voice edged with concern. "A very *strong* one. Also known as lye. You can use it to make soap… or, you know, *dissolve flesh.*"

Kohaku's eyebrows shot up. "Wait, *what*?!"

Yuzuriha's eyes widened, halfway between horrified and furious. "Senku. *Please* tell me you didn't breathe in something that melts people."

Senku didn't even glance over. "Technically, it only dissolves organic tissue on contact in high enough concentrations. I wasn't bathing in it. Just handling a crystallized batch when the ventilation failed. Got a mild pulmonary irritation. Nothing permanent. I did get lucky though, I ten billion percent don't recommend it."

"That's not *nothing,*" Taiju yelped. "That's *how people die!*"

Even Francois raised an eyebrow. "Sodium hydroxide vapors are highly caustic, especially if heated. It corrodes respiratory tissue. Surely, there were safety procedures. This does explain the ease with which he took the cigarette however."

Gen groaned and dragged a hand down his face. “And *that*, ladies and gentlemen, is why he’s a menace wrapped in a lab coat.”

“But like, *why* would you even breathe it?” Chrome asked, eyes bugging out. He had to know, “What did it even *taste* like?”

Senku finally glanced over, dry as bone. “Like burning sinuses and bad decisions.”

Behind them, Ada chuckled from where she’d been leaning in the doorway, arms folded casually over her chest, “You know, Statistically speaking, about 12% of social smokers never develop dependence. It's all about moderation, ritual, and self-awareness. Besides, it’s not like we’re letting him smoke on an empty stomach. That’s what *really* wrecks your tolerance.”

Rajiv shot her a long-suffering look. “That’s not how public health works, Doc.”

“No,” she replied, deadpan. “But it *is* how surviving in the middle of nowhere with no budget and three functional microscopes works.”

“Twelve percent, huh? That a real stat or just something she made up?”

Yuzuriha frowned. “That *does* sound weirdly specific.”

All eyes drifted to Senku.

He stayed leaned back, putting his arms behind his neck with a roll of his eyes, “I’m not Google. Just because I’ve got a whole bunch of science knowledge doesn’t mean I’m wired to answer every random number you toss at me.”

There was a pause.

Then he sighed.

"...But yeah. She's mostly right. The twelve percent comes from older longitudinal studies—pre-2010, I think—on adult social smoking habits, especially among low-dependency recreational users. More recent research adjusted the range to 12–17% depending on environment and access, but the core idea's still solid."

He finally glanced up at the room, deadpan.

"Happy?"

Chrome was staring. "Wait. You actually *knew* that?"

Gen snorted. "You *just* told them you're not Google and then *Googled* it with your brain. Honestly, I don't know why anyone's surprised anymore."

Senku rolled his eyes again, but the corner of his mouth twitched faintly, "Whatever. Just don't ask me about 1970s tax reforms. I actually *don't* care about that one. I have perfect recall, but I was never an adult before the world went to shit and never got the joy of touching taxes."

> Senku huffed a laugh, sharp and low. "I can't believe you just justified recreational carcinogen use with a probability model."
>
> Ada grinned. "Kid, everything's a probability model."
>
> Luis held the cigarette between two fingers and raised it toward Senku in a mock toast. "Welcome to the real scientific method, oh, and Happy Birthday, Kid."

"Birthday?" Kohaku leaned forward. "*That* was his birthday?!"

Yuzuriha’s hands flew to her mouth. “*Oh my god,* they gave him alcohol and cigarettes on his birthday—!”

Ukyo’s expression twitched. “...I think that was their version of a party.”

Taiju's jaw dropped. “THAT was a *party*?!”

“Apparently,” Gen said, almost reverently, eyes still on the screen.

Yuzuriha’s distress softened into something more gentle, her shoulders dropping as she watched the screen with renewed focus. “I thought they were just messing with him, but… they *cared.* That was them making space for him.”

Senku’s mouth twitched.

Not in a smirk. Not in amusement.

In mild irritation.

Because *this*—this warm, emotional group reaction—wasn’t for them. It wasn’t *their* moment to get misty-eyed over. That cigarette toast, that laugh by the fire, that sting of ethanol and a half-burnt grin—that was *his*. A flash of strange, brittle connection with a team that had let him in when they had every reason not to. And now the Kingdom of Science was sitting here, cooing over it like it was some vintage postcard from a coming-of-age movie.

Senku exhaled through his nose and slouched back further in his chair.

Gen, already watching him out of the corner of his eye, offered a knowing hum. Carefully, knowing that this was a sore point, he teased, “Awww, what’s wrong? Don’t like it when people get sentimental about your brush with peer-pressure-enabled adulthood?”

Senku scowled. “Shut up.”

Yuzuriha, oblivious, clasped her hands together like she’d just seen a baby deer in the snow. “They *cared* so much! They really made him part of the team!”

Senku buried his face in one hand. “Oh my god.”

“Aw,” Gen teased under his breath. “Happy birthday, science boy.”

Senku lifted one middle finger just high enough for Gen to see it.

Subtle. Deliberate. Casual.

The scientific equivalent of *kindly shut the hell up.*

Gen *gasped* like he’d been personally scandalized. “Oh my! A middle finger? From *Senku-chan*~? And here I thought you were a man of data, not crude American gestures.”

Senku didn’t look at him. “International communication systems require universal symbols.”

“Oh, sure,” Gen said brightly. “So this is just *scientific outreach*?”

Senku still didn’t look at him. “Ten billion percent.”

Gen turned back to the screen with the most exaggerated sigh in the world. “If you wanted to flirt, you could’ve just said so.”

Senku *did* look at him then—dry. Flat. Dangerously close to smiling.

Gen held his gaze, smug and satisfied, but there was a flicker of something softer beneath the showmanship. Because yeah, he’d poked at the exact thing Senku had been stewing over. *On purpose.* He’d been walking a line so thin it might as well have been theoretical—mocking the weight without dismissing it. Teasing the burn without pressing the bruise.

But the goal had never been to win the argument.

It had been to *win that look*.

And mission accomplished.

Gen tapped his fingers against his knee, casual as ever. “Knew I could still get a reaction out of you. You were looking way too tragic over there. Had to restore balance.”

Senku rolled his eyes. “Your concept of balance involves psychological warfare.”

“I prefer to call it *emotional calibration*,” Gen said sweetly.

Senku huffed under his breath. Almost a laugh. And for the first time in hours, the tension in his shoulders dipped low enough to register. Gen had *absolutely* done it on purpose. Steered the emotional current with the same ease he used to bluff a deck of cards. He wasn't pretending otherwise. He had known *exactly* how much weight to apply, how deep to press, when to joke, and when to back off.

It was impressive.

Infuriating.

Hot. *Which was a word that Senku had NEVER used for someone before.*

He would never say it. Not now. Not with everything happening on the screen, with the weight of memory still thick in his chest. But he *thought* it—sharp and unwanted, flickering just behind his ribs.

Dammit, Mentalist.

They all smiled at him.

Huh... Was it his birthday already? Was this... A birthday celebration?

It was late. The kind of late where even the mosquitoes had gone quiet. Senku sat at the edge of the lab's outer deck, feet dangling over cracked concrete. The camp generator hummed faintly in the distance, one of its red lights blinking in rhythm with the low chirp of something unseen in the brush. He had his satellite laptop balanced on one knee, a warm cup of coffee in hand, and his fingers—

His fingers were moving.

Two pressed together in front of his eyes. Conditioning. Just like Dr. Okoye had shown him all those months ago. He still didn't have it down like she did, but when things got overwhelming—too many samples, too many charts, too many emergencies—Senku found it helped narrow his thoughts like a laser beam. Push all the noise to the side. He didn't do it when the others were around. Too obvious. Too derivative.

Francois, voice soft and certain, added, “It is not uncommon to take a mentor’s tools and make them your own. But this—this is how you know it mattered. It became ritual.”

Yuzuriha’s hands were clasped in her lap. “It’s weird. I’ve seen him do that for years and never asked. Never even thought to ask.”

Ryusui whistled, low and sharp. “He really *is* built out of everything he’s survived.”

But Gen?

Oh, *this*—this was the moment it truly *clicked* for Gen.

He’d understood it before, on a surface level. He’s a mentalist—he notices what people don’t say just as clearly as what they do. He’d seen the tension in Senku’s shoulders every time the group reacted too strongly. The way he got quieter when the topic got too close. He’d picked up on the discomfort, the restraint. But now? Watching that version of Senku on the screen—alone, raw, unaware of any eyes on him—it stopped being theoretical.

Because it *was* intimate.

It was the kind of moment no one ever shares willingly. A moment *meant* to be private. A vulnerability disguised as habit. A coping mechanism passed down like a whispered secret. Something Senku never would have *shown* them—and yet, here it was, being projected for everyone to see.

And Gen… felt it in his chest. Like a small, sharp twist. Because Senku wasn’t just embarrassed. He wasn’t even just uncomfortable. He was *exposed*. In a way that violated his usual distance. His quiet control. He wasn’t hiding behind his usual layers, because he hadn’t *known* he needed to. The version on that screen had no defenses up. It was just *him*. Alone with his thoughts, using a borrowed ritual to hold the world still for a moment longer.

And Gen got it. Not just the concept—but the *weight* of it.

Senku had never been afraid of sharing knowledge. He gave science freely, endlessly, to anyone who could keep up. But emotions? Memories? *Meaning*?

He knew, the moment this whole “reacting to the past” started, that it wasn’t going to end with Senku. Maybe Senku’s past was the most immediately relevant—maybe it was the clearest thread in this unraveling story—but the pattern had already been set. They had already seen into his moment under petrification... The screen clearly didn’t discriminate. It peeled people open. Bit by bit. Memory by memory. And sooner or later?

It was going to be *his* turn again.

Not just his. *All* of them. The whole crew.

They’d all get their moment under the microscope.

Even just that brief moment when they looked at his thoughts during petrification. IT had been a lot, but the whole 70 years had been put into something like 15 minutes at most. They had been sitting here for HOURS watching Senku get picked apart.

He had the feeling it wasn't anywhere near done either..

But out here? Alone?

He let himself do it. Once. Twice.

The satellite laptop buzzed softly as a call came through. The name on the screen lit up in bold kana:

Dad.

Senku clicked it.

"Yo," he said casually.

"Senku!" Byakuya's voice practically *burst* through the speaker, bright and warm and very much too loud for the hour. "You alive? Haven't heard from you in a week! You better not be lost in the jungle or unconscious in a ditch somewhere."

"I'm in Uganda, not the Amazon," Senku muttered. "And I sent you three emails."

"Yeah, but they were all science gibberish and a photo of a stick insect with the caption 'evolution ten billion percent exhilarating.' Doesn't count."

Yuzuriha squinted at the screen. "*Three* emails? That's all he sent?"

Taiju blinked, then leaned in. "Wait—he sent you *three* emails too?"

She nodded slowly. "Yeah. All science stuff. One of them was literally just a picture of a bug."

"A stick insect," Taiju added helpfully. "He captioned it 'evolution ten billion percent exhilarating.' just like for Byakuya."

Yuzuriha groaned softly, crossing her arms. "That's the *same* one he sent me." Still, her lips were smiling and her eyes were wide and happy - If nothing else, it proved that they were all family.

Senku, still watching the screen, didn't turn. "It *was* a good stick insect."

Taiju chuckled. "He also sent me a breakdown of Uganda's annual rainfall and told me to check the math. Like I'd even know what to look for."

Yuzuriha huffed. "I knew he didn't have time for full letters, but come *on*, Senku. You were out there for *months.* You could've said something real."

“I did,” Senku replied mildly, "It was a great stick bug. The rainfall was pertinent to my work. Nothing more real than that."

“Oh my *god*,” Yuzuriha muttered, but she was smiling.

Senku rolled his eyes, but a small smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Stick insect was cool.”

Ryusui leaned back in his chair with a booming laugh, arms crossed and eyes sharp with amusement. “Ha! The best things never change!”

“Because it *was* a great stick bug,” Senku muttered again, not even pretending to be embarrassed.

Gen choked back a laugh, one hand over his mouth. “Honestly, if I ever get a bug photo from you, I’ll know it’s serious.”

“I’ll be sure to include a pun in the subject line,” Senku replied dryly.

Gen gave him a lopsided smile, eyes crinkling. “Naturally. I’d expect nothing less.”

Senku didn’t look at him—not directly—but something in his chest buzzed a little louder than before. It wasn’t like Gen had just praised his intellect. It wasn’t about science or survival strategy. It wasn't even that GEN was being smart, which was what usually had him acting like a fool around the Mentalist. It was just... Gen hadn’t flinched at the absurdity of the stick bug; he hadn’t mocked the eccentricity or dismissed the email as childish. He’d *accepted* it. *Him.* Just like that.

Mentalist was dangerous, he really was.

"Can't argue with that," Byakuya agreed cheerfully. "So? How's it going? You saving lives yet or just scaring your coworkers with your caffeine intake?"

"I'm optimizing workflows and cutting down false positive rates on the river test protocol," Senku replied, sipping his coffee, deciding handedly to not mention any alcohol or cigarette smoking that he himself had done at the moment, "Also, I've managed to shave off 12% of the expected burnout curve among the team using a bioethanol barter system."

There was a pause on the other end.

"...You made moonshine and traded it for snacks, didn't you."

Yuzuriha groaned, both hands flying to her face. "He really *did* admit to it like it was part of his field report. Just skipped the part where he drank it entirely like that would make it better!"

Francois nodded once, hands folded. "A remarkably efficient summary, if not exactly subtle. I must admit, 'bioethanol barter system' has a certain scientific poetry."

Ukyo gave a low whistle, shaking his head. "And Byakuya didn't even sound surprised. That man was *so ready* for this kind of answer.

Senku coughed. "That's… an overly simplistic interpretation."

Byakuya laughed. "God, I love you."

Senku grunted but didn't argue.

The laughter in the room died down just a little.

Not gone—just softened. Shifted.

Because that line? That *wasn't* a joke. Not from Byakuya. And on the screen, young Senku didn't answer. Didn't react. Just gave one of his usual noncommittal noises and kept his eyes on the laptop.

Present-day Senku didn't flinch.

But Gen's smile faded a fraction as he glanced sideways. He knew that sound—he *knew* that grunt. It was the kind Senku used when something *landed*. When it stuck harder than he wanted it to. And even now, Senku was looking at the screen like he wanted to reach in and rewind it. Just once.

Yuzuriha's shoulders hunched slightly, arms folded in front of her. "He should've said something back," she whispered, voice soft. "Even just… a little. It was his dad."

Senku didn't look at her. But he *was* thinking about it. Quietly. Deep in the part of his mind where old echoes lived. He hadn't said anything back. He hadn't known what to say at the time—or maybe he'd just decided there wasn't a point. That it was understood. But now? Now he kind of wished he *had.*

Just once.

Ryusui, quieter than usual, still declared, "Bet your old man knew anyway. Sometimes men don't need words!"

"Alright, smartass," Byakuya continued, "How about your team? You getting along with them?"

Senku hesitated. His hand twitched against the cup, and his fingers brushed together—index to thumb.

Tap. Tap.

He kept his eyes on the dark horizon. "They're fine."

“That was your ‘not answering’ voice,” Byakuya said immediately.

“Whoa,” Chrome whispered. “That was *fast.*”

Ukyo gave a low hum, arms folded as he watched the screen. “That man knows him down to the millisecond.”

“Didn’t even let him get a second lie out,” Ryusui added with a grin.

Yuzuriha didn’t say anything right away. Her hands rested in her lap, fingers wound tightly together—not anxious, just… thoughtful. She watched Byakuya’s face on the screen, still smiling, still gentle, even as he called Senku out with casual precision.

“I wish…” she started, then caught herself. Her mouth twitched, uncertain. “I wish my parents had known me that well. Or even tried to.”

Taiju glanced at her, eyes soft. But Yuzuriha smiled a second later—bittersweet, but real. “But… I’m glad Senku had someone who did.”

Senku didn’t say anything—didn’t need to. But his hand had stilled slightly, his fingers resting loosely against the mug now. His expression didn’t crack, but his posture softened just enough to give him away.

“I answered.”

“Nope. I *know* you. You gave me the same tone you used when you were seven and I asked if you broke the microwave.”

“It wasn’t *technically* broken—”

“Uh-huh,” Byakuya interrupted. “So? Spill. Who’s giving you a hard time?”

Senku let out a long breath. “No one.”

Another pause.

Then: “...You like them.”

Gen blinked slowly. “...Damn.”

He didn’t even bother trying to mask the awe in his voice this time. “I knew the old man was good, but that? That was deduction so fast it left skid marks.”

Ryusui chuckled, arms behind his head. “He’s not a scientist, but he’s definitely got the instincts. He seems more like a mentalist than a scientist like Senku.”

Francois nodded approvingly. “Emotional intuition at that level is rare. It’s no wonder Senku turned out the way he did.”

“Isn’t it kinda scary how fast he got there?” Chrome whispered, eyes wide.

Yuzuriha had both hands over her heart now, quietly melting. “He just knows him so well…”

Gen, still watching the screen, let out a half-laugh and shook his head. “No wonder Senku’s the way he is,” he murmured. “Imagine growing up with someone who could read you like that.”

Then, softer—almost to himself:

“…It’s kind of beautiful.”

What was *less* beautiful, Gen thought, was how someone as reasonably well-adjusted as Senku—someone who'd grown up in a reasonably loving household, with a reasonably emotionally available and brilliant father—could have that whole conversation about emotions, friends, and flirting… and not realize how much it had stung. Even as Gen smiled through every word. Maybe that was just a testament to his acting skills.

And still—*still*—Senku had given him that soft look tonight, when he'd compared Gen to his father. A look that wasn't defensive, or cold, or calculated. Just *gentle*. Sincere, in that quiet, Senku kind of way.

Senku compressed everything. Folded it inward, kept it hidden in sealed containers he didn't let anyone open. But Gen was almost certain there was something *real* in there. Something that would give, eventually.

It was just a question of *when*.

And how much it would hurt getting there.

> Senku stiffened. "I didn't say that."
>
> "You didn't have to," Byakuya said gently. "You're calling me from a concrete bunker in the middle of Africa and still made time to tell me about your coworkers' stress levels and snack economy. You like them, Senku. And that's great."
>
> Senku stared out into the night.
>
> His fingers tapped against the cup again—this time unconsciously.

Chrome leaned forward a little, eyes wide. "Man… is it just me, or was younger Senku kinda… adorable when he didn't know how to answer stuff like that?"

"Right?" Yuzuriha gave a quiet laugh, hand over her mouth. "He looked so thrown off. Like his brain couldn't decide if he was allowed to feel things."

“I like it,” Ryusui said with a grin. “It’s good to see him flustered. Reminds me he’s not just a science robot.”

Francois smiled faintly. “There’s something… very human about it. Honest, in a way that’s rare for him.”

“I guess,” He muttered, “I mean, it’s weird.”

“Weird how?”

Senku’s brow furrowed slightly. “They’re all older. Experienced. Real professionals. I’m fifteen, and they’ve let me distill liquor and lecture them on water chemistry like I belong here. I don’t even know if they actually see me as part of the team, or just... the weird kid tagging along. Feels stupid, caring about that.”

Byakuya’s voice was quiet, but steady. “It’s not stupid. And yeah, they’re older—but so what? You’re doing the work. You’re showing up. And if they’re as smart as you say they are, they know exactly how much value you bring.

On the couch, Senku exhaled through his nose, arms crossed loosely over his chest. “Damn,” he muttered. “I remember feeling like that.”

Gen glanced sideways. “You say that like it was twenty years ago instead of… what, three?”

“It feels like thirty-seven hundred, give or take,” Senku shot back dryly. “But hey, who’s counting?”

Gen blinked. “Oh. Right—” Then he froze.

His smile flickered, faltered for a breath. That had been careless—something Gen almost never was. Senku didn't look offended, but it still caught Gen off guard. Not just because of the misstep, but because of the *conversation* they'd had earlier. Senku hadn't been joking when he said he understood. When he'd muttered, *'I came close a few times.'* Followed by: '*You can ask me anything you want.'* And Gen couldn't stop thinking about it now that Senku brought it back up. Even for him—even with all his years reading people, nudging conversations past polite thresholds—this was a strange line to walk. Fascination, yes. But also respect. Empathy. And maybe something else that he wasn't naming yet.

"Wait, you don't care now?" Chrome asked, blinking.

Senku gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I care if the work gets done. If I'm trusted to do it. But I'm not fifteen anymore. If someone doubts me now, they get to watch me prove them wrong and look stupid in the process."

Ryusui laughed. "Ha! Spoken like a man who's grown into his arrogance."

"It's not arrogance if you're right," Senku muttered—but the smirk tugging at the edge of his mouth gave him away.

Yuzuriha tilted her head, watching him fondly. "You really did grow up a lot out there."

Francois folded their hands neatly. "It was a crucible. Pressure refines."

Gen had gone quiet, but his thoughts were running wild. Now that Senku had *invited* the conversation, his curiosity was unstoppable. The psychologist in him stirred back to life, dusted off its notes, and started building a framework.

- *How did you preserve a sense of self with no external input?*
- *Did your mind construct narratives to fill the silence?*
- *Were there dreams? Hallucinations? Internal voices?*

- *Did you track time? Or abandon it completely?*
- *What stopped you, at the edge, from letting go?*

The last one he might save for later. He still wasn't sure if Senku would answer something like that. He didn't reach for a notebook, but the motion twitched in his fingers. Across from him, Senku shifted—eyes narrowing in recognition. Gen can't believe that he was caught so soon, he might be losing his edge.

"You're prepping questions already?" he asked, and this time, his voice wasn't flat or sarcastic—it was sharp with *interest.* "No kidding?"

Gen smiled faintly. "You offered. You can't exactly drop another *'I was awake for 3700 years'* on someone and not expect a little professional curiosity."

Senku leaned forward slightly, the gleam in his eyes unmistakable now. "Good. I *want* to be studied. Think about it—first documented case of long-term petrification consciousness, full sensory deprivation, memory retention across millennia? There's never been a data point like this." His whole posture had shifted—brighter, more animated. "Hell, we could write the first psych profile of cognitive isolation under suspended animation. Imagine what we'd learn about brain plasticity, memory preservation, hell, even time perception under nonlinear conditions—"

Gen's brows lifted slightly. "You sound more excited than I am."

"Damn right I am," Senku said, grin sharp. "You've got the brains for it. Might as well put them to use."

That startled something warm behind Gen's ribs. He covered it with a half-laugh. "Careful, Senku. Keep talking like that and I'll start taking notes."

Senku didn't back off. If anything, he looked even more intrigued. "Good. Do it. Start a full case file. If we survive all this, I want you to publish it."

Gen blinked, then smiled—something softer, more thoughtful. “You’re really serious about this.”

Senku shrugged, but the spark in his eyes hadn’t dimmed. “We’re rebuilding humanity. Why not rebuild psychology while we’re at it?”

And Gen thought, not for the first time, that for all his bluster and control, Senku looked downright *alive* when someone challenged his mind. He really might start that case file after all.

Senku didn’t say anything right away.

Byakuya gave him a moment.

“Trust goes both ways, you know,” he added. “And I think you’re starting to let people in—even if it makes you uncomfortable. That’s not weakness, Senku. That’s growth.”

Senku rolled his eyes half-heartedly. “Getting all philosophical now?”

“It’s a dad’s job.”

“That's... kinda beautiful,” Yuzuriha murmured, her voice softer than usual.

Ukyo gave a small hum. “He was proud of you. That much is obvious.”

Senku snorted lightly. “He was biased.”

“Doesn’t mean he was wrong,” Francois said. “Bias and truth are not always mutually exclusive.”

There was a lull in the conversation after that. Comfortable. Quiet.

“...Hey, Senku?”

“Hm?”

“You’re doing good. Not just science-good. You-good. You know what I mean?”

Senku didn’t respond right away.

But his fingers tapped once more—steady, measured.

Yeah. He knew what Byakuya meant.

“Thanks, old man.”

“No problem, kiddo.”

“Oh *my god*,” Yuzuriha whispered, covering her mouth with both hands. “That was so *sweet*.”

Chrome looked stunned. “I didn’t even know Senku *could* say thank you like that.”

Kohaku tilted her head, eyes wide. “That was... really moving. Your father must have cared about you deeply.”

Gen let out a dramatic sigh, flopping sideways across the couch like a fainting noblewoman. “I think my heart just exploded from secondhand sincerity.”

Senku groaned into one hand. “You people are insufferable.”

“You love us,” Ukyo said mildly, lips twitching.

Francois gave a small nod of approval. Their all too impassive face still playing its part even though their eyes were gleaming with amusement, “Affection disguised as irritation. Very classic.”

Yuzuriha leaned forward, clasping her hands together. “Senku, I know you hate when we call things cute, but that was cute. So, so cute.”

Senku dragged his hand down his face. “I should’ve frozen myself for another few years.”

“Too late,” Gen sing-songed, far too pleased. “You’re in too deep now, Senku-chan~!"

And as the call ended and the screen went dark, Senku didn’t move for a while. Just stared out at the stars, fingers still ticking lightly together, the rhythm quiet and mechanical and—maybe, just maybe—a little bit comforting too.

The morning was hot enough that even the roosters gave up early.

Senku ducked under a drying line of blood sample slips as he moved toward the diagnostics tent. Rajiv had gone into town for supply restocking. Luis was checking vehicle fuel storage and threatening to fistfight the customs liaison. Dr. Okoye was exactly where Senku expected—head bent over a makeshift culture station, sleeves rolled up, fingers stained with iodine and ink.

“You’re late,” She muttered without looking up.

Senku dropped a thick packet of neatly labeled slides on the table. “You said 0700.”

“I said *not later than* 0700.”

“It’s 0651.”

She glanced at the clock. “Slacker.”

Chrome recoiled slightly. “She’s like—Senku, but meaner.”

“She’s not mean,” Yuzuriha said, eyes wide. “She’s just… intense.”

“Well, well,” Ukyo said quietly, tilting his head. “So *that’s* where all the precision came from.”

Kohaku nodded, a feral grin on her lips, “She trained him like a warrior. Just for science instead of combat. I like her a lot”

Ryusui let out a low whistle. “No wonder he gets twitchy if someone breathes too hard near a microscope.”

Francois gave a faint hum of approval. “Her standards are formidable. But effective.”

Gen’s smile twitched at the corner. “I’m honestly not sure if I’m impressed or horrified. Both, probably.”

And in the present, Senku hadn’t said a word. He just watched the screen, fingers still tapping—not fidgeting, but calibrating. Holding rhythm.

Gen’s attention flicked to Senku again—almost out of habit by now. But this time, his eyes narrowed. Senku’s fingers were still tapping against his leg. Not nervously. Not aimlessly. The rhythm was steady. Precise. Almost mechanical.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Seconds, Gen realized. He wasn’t fidgeting—he was *counting*. Gen’s breath caught for half a second. He’d seen Senku tap before, in those brief flashes from the past. Once while logging notes, another time while monitoring the centrifuge. But it hadn’t been *like this*. Not constant. Not as ingrained. Not as reflexive. This wasn’t just a quirk. It was an *adaptation.*

Gen’s mind raced back to that earlier conversation again.

Senku had said he stayed awake through all 3700 years. Had fought to hold on. And now Gen was watching the *evidence* of that. Right in front of him.

He trained himself to count time, Gen thought, something cold and awed and deeply aching settling behind his ribs. *No external input. No clocks. No sunrises. Just—seconds. Measured, maintained. Preserved.* Gen didn't realize how long he'd been watching until Senku glanced sideways.

Not much—just a flick of the eyes. But it was sharp. Direct. *Knowing.*

The tapping didn't stop.

"You're staring," Senku said under his breath, voice pitched low so the others wouldn't catch it. The corner of his mouth quirked, not quite a smile. "What's the diagnosis, doctor?"

Gen didn't answer right away. He tilted his head slightly, something thoughtful settling in his expression.

"You've been doing that since the screen came on," he murmured back. "Steady. Seconds. You're counting."

Senku didn't deny it. He just let the silence stretch for a beat before answering in that same quiet tone.

"Picked it up after I woke up. Didn't realize how hard it'd be to stop." His eyes didn't leave the screen, but his voice had gone a little dry. "Go ahead and add it to the case file. Psychological fallout from long-term petrification. Patient exhibits compulsive timekeeping behaviors. Possibly obsessive. Mildly functional."

Gen raised a brow. “That’s how you’re framing it?”

Senku’s lips twitched. “You’re the mentalist. Frame it however you want.”

There was no shame in his tone. No embarrassment. If anything, there was a spark of challenge. Like he wanted Gen to figure it out. To dig deeper. To *name* it. Gen smiled, just barely. “Don’t tempt me. You’re already the most fascinating subject I’ve ever had.”

Senku huffed under his breath, but he didn’t look away.

> Senku smirked faintly and leaned over the edge of the table, watching her work. “Sample 302 still positive?”
>
> “Stronger than yesterday,” she confirmed, voice clipped. “It’s mutating fast. Base pairs are showing some drift. Not enough to change our model yet, but if it shifts into recombinant spread patterns—”
>
> “We’re screwed.”
>
> “Medical term, that.”

Francois gave a quiet nod, ever unruffled. “Ah. Classic gallows humor. The kind of wit born under pressure, when survival hangs by a thread.”

Kohaku blinked. “Gallows humor?”

Francois turned to her smoothly. “It’s a type of joke, Miss Kohaku—one used when circumstances are grim. Named for the gallows—where people were once executed. The humor doesn’t erase the danger. It simply offers a moment of distance from it. A shield, of sorts, forged from irony.”

Kohaku frowned thoughtfully. “So… making jokes in the face of death?”

“Exactly,” Francois said. “Not out of disrespect, but as a way to cope. Especially in professions like medicine or war, where the consequences of failure are absolute.”

Kohaku nodded slowly. “That… actually makes a lot of sense.”

She straightened, reaching for a nearby flask of water. Sweat clung to her temples, but she didn’t wipe it away. Her hair was buzzed short on the sides, the top tucked into a faded red scarf knotted at the base of her neck. Her lab coat was open, sleeves rolled up, streaked with dust and old disinfectant stains. She moved like she didn’t notice—like nothing could stick to her for long.

Senku watched her with half his focus, the rest still cataloging environmental variables. But something about her posture caught him. The way she stood tall without trying to. The way her gaze cut clean through the haze, sharp and bright, like a flame refusing to dim. He didn’t realize he was comparing it—*that* look in her eye—to the way he felt staring down a new hypothesis. That locked-in shine. The hum in the blood when the world got quiet except for the problem in front of you. He’d seen it in the mirror once or twice.

“Ahhh…” Ryusui breathed out, a grin spreading slowly—less cocky, more awed. “She’s beautiful.”

Yuzuriha, without hesitation, nodded. “Yeah. She really is.”

Ryusui didn’t even glance her way. “Not just her face. The way she *moves*. That kind of confidence—that kind of clarity in the middle of chaos? Damn near magnetic.”

Ukyo gave a small hum. “Well, well. She commands attention just by existing.”

Kohaku tilted her head. “It’s like she’s on the battlefield, even when she’s not.”

Gen smiled faintly. “I see we’re all developing our own personal religion around Dr. Okoye.”

“You’re gonna burn yourself out,” Senku said casually, elbowing a stool into place. “Even genius has metabolic limits.”

“Mm. Coming from the kid who once stayed awake for 96 hours to solve a hypothetical protein folding structure.”

“It was 94.”

She gave him a look. “It’s not a compliment.”

They worked in silence for a moment—notes, cross-checks, the occasional sound of latex gloves snapping into place.

In the present, Yuzuriha crossed her arms hard enough to crease her sleeves. “I *hate* this,” she said, voice sharper than usual. “Why does he do that? Push himself until he breaks? It’s not smart. It’s not efficient. It’s—”

Gen cut in lightly, just enough to catch her attention before she could spiral further, “Well, not to excuse the behavior, but it *is* clinically fascinating. Sleep deprivation over 72 hours starts mimicking psychosis in healthy adults. Visual disturbances, microsleeps, paranoia. At 90-plus hours, you're looking at full dissociation risk—some even report auditory hallucinations.”

Yuzuriha blinked at him, thrown off just enough to stop mid-rant.

Then Okoye leaned back, eyes narrowing slightly. “What’s with you today?”

Senku didn’t look up from his charting. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been quiet.”

“I’m always quiet.”

“Not this kind of quiet.”

He paused. Then: “I’ve been thinking about your neural filter trick.”

That made her arch an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Senku held up his hand, his index and middle finger pressed tightly together as he put them in front of his face. It felt silly, kind of like a character from Naruto, but at

the same time, it was familiar, warm, “Blocking out external noise to accelerate decision-making under stress. Focus conditioning through motor repetition. It’s… efficient.”

Chrome tilted his head toward Gen. “Hey. I’ve seen you do something like that. With your hand. Like during negotiations or when you’re thinking really hard. Is that the same thing Senku and Dr. Okoye are doing?”

Gen blinked, then glanced down at his hand. He flexed his fingers once, watching the motion like it belonged to someone else.

“Ahh. That one?” He smiled, the kind of smile that usually came with misdirection. “Sort of.”

Yuzuriha leaned forward, curious. “Sort of?”

Gen wiggled his fingers theatrically, then pressed his index and middle finger together in front of his face, mimicking the gesture they’d just seen from Senku.

“I *have* used that. The neural filter pose, the finger lock, all that jazz. Especially when I wanted to look like I was deep in thought and keeping my cool.” He let the motion drop, waving one hand airily. “Very dramatic. Very effective. But mostly for show.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait—it doesn’t *do* anything for you?”

“Not really,” Gen admitted, more gently this time. “It looks impressive. People see your fingers twitching and your eyes narrowing and assume you're five steps ahead. Great for bluffing.”

“But the real thing?” Ukyo asked, watching him closely.

Gen nodded slowly. “When I’m actually overwhelmed? Actually trying to stay present and not spin out? I do this—” He held up his hand and tapped his ring and pinky fingers together twice, subtle and rhythmic. “Keeps my head quiet. Keeps my thoughts from unraveling. It’s part of a self-regulation loop I picked up back in my therapist days. Controlled repetition lowers stress responses—keeps the prefrontal cortex engaged when you’re about to go full panic spiral.”

There was a pause.

“You don’t usually tell people stuff like that,” Yuzuriha said softly.

Gen shrugged, but the smile that followed was real. “Figured I owed you all a little honesty. After all, I’m planning to write the first psych profile of a man who counted thirty-seven hundred years by seconds.” He gave Senku a sidelong glance. “Seemed only fair to put something on the table, too.”

Senku didn’t say anything.

But the corner of his mouth twitched. Like maybe he respected that more than he’d admit.

“You trying it?”

“I’ve started.”

“And?”

Senku hesitated. Then admitted, “It helps.”

Okoye didn’t tease him. Instead, she nodded once. “It will. You’re good in pressure, Senku—but that’s different from the long haul. This job wears you down slowly, like acid on metal. Takes your edge if you’re not careful.”

She turned toward him, something briefly unguarded in her face. “You’ve got the kind of brain that can change the world. But that also means you’ll see it breaking before most people even notice. You need to be able to *stay sharp* when that happens. Not burn out, not break down. That’s the job.”

Senku studied her.

"And you?"

"I'm already rusting," she said with a faint grin. "But I can still sharpen to steel when I need to."

The moment passed. But Gen's mind didn't.

He leaned back, hands steepled lightly beneath his chin. That smile—*I'm already rusting*—was a tell. A mask. One he recognized immediately. Not self-pity. Not bitterness. But a *measured acknowledgment of wear*. He'd seen that look before. In veterans. In caregivers. In performers who'd played the same role too long without applause. Ada Okoye didn't feel jealous of Senku. That wasn't her tone. If anything, there was pride in her voice. Admiration, even. But also—something else. Something deeper.

Comparative aging, Gen thought. *Not in years. In spark.*

Senku burned like white-hot magnesium—young, sharp, unrelenting. Ada still had fire, but it had tempered into something steadier. Dimmer, maybe. She wasn't rusty in capability. But she felt it. She *feared* it. That slow erosion of edge, not from failure, but from sheer endurance. He could hear the thought behind her words, clear as if she'd spoken it aloud: *I used to be that sharp. That clear. And now I'm not sure I still am.*

And yet, she smiled when she said it. Framed it as a joke. Because that's what people like her did. They buried the existential wear-and-tear under dry humor and unflinching standards.

Gen exhaled slowly. "She doesn't want to shine like him," he murmured to himself. "She just wants to be sure she hasn't gone dull."

Chrome looked over, confused. "Huh?"

Gen waved it off with a soft smile.

She reached into her coat and pulled out two small glass bottles—dark, unlabeled, with wax-sealed tops. She passed one to him without comment.

Senku blinked. “Is this your stash? Didn't know we had a second alcohol creator on the team.”

“Field-grade alcohol. Distilled from whatever Luis didn’t eat last week.”

“You’re breaking half a dozen protocols.”

“Seven,” she corrected. “It’s good science, Senku. Sometimes that means *not* asking permission.”

“*NOOOO WAY!*” Chrome shouted, grabbing his head.

“He’s gonna *drink it? Again?!*” Yuzuriha yelped.

“I thought the whiskey incident was a one-time thing!” Kohaku said, scandalized. “Didn’t he hate it?!”

“He *did*,” Ukyo said calmly, watching with morbid fascination. “But clearly, pain isn’t a deterrent.”

“Ahhh, my beautiful, self-destructive man,” Ryusui groaned, throwing a hand dramatically over his heart. “What a chaotic rebel.”

Senku rolled his eyes.

“I—he’s not even hesitating,” Yuzuriha whispered. “He just—*he’s doing it.*”

Francois, ever composed, gave a slow blink. “At least this time, it appears to have purpose other than birthday merriment."

Gen pinched the bridge of his nose, suppressing a laugh. “He’s doing it *for science,* remember? Are we really considering THAT to be better than a birthday party? I guess that peer pressure from gremlins in lab coats are crazy strong."

“I don’t want a world where Senku becomes a casual drinker,” Yuzuriha said, half-laughing, half-panicked.

“Too late,” Gen sighed, clutching his imaginary case file. “Day 1: He drinks for science. Day 27: He requests pairing notes with fermented meat substitutes. Day 54: *He drinks recreationally. It's just the way of things. That's the way of things~!*”

He turned the bottle over in his hand.

“Why give me one?”

“Because I trust your judgment,” she said simply. “Even if you’re too young and too blunt and probably smarter than I was at your age.” Her eyes gleamed. “And because I want you to remember that even out here—amid the heat, the rot, the death—there are moments of clarity. Little choices that remind you that you’re still *alive*. Moments like having a drink with us, a cigarette by the fire. Those people moments, they matter."

She lifted her bottle in mock salute. “One for the long game.”

Senku clinked his bottle to hers. “For the science.”

They drank, Senku's face screwed up in distaste, and her eyes laughed at him. He still drank it though—he much preferred the cigarettes to the alcohol.

“*WHAT?!*” Chrome practically shrieked, recoiling so hard he knocked over a stool. “NO—WAIT—WHAT?! HE LIKES THE CIGARETTES MORE?!”

Kohaku looked *personally betrayed*. “You swore those things were disgusting! Poison! Smoke *death sticks!*”

Ryusui clutched his head with both hands. “My god. He’s evolving. Alcohol *and* cigarettes? Whats next Senku? We have weed on the list as well? Shrooms? This is clearly a man in *transition.*”

Ukyo, who hadn’t blinked once, finally let out a slow breath. “Well, well. That’s… A little unexpected.”

Francois raised an eyebrow. “I suspected the threshold for his aversions was contextual. Crisis breeds tolerance.”

“Don’t *explain* it!” Yuzuriha begged. “That makes it *worse!*”

Senku, utterly unbothered, crossed his arms. “I’m not going to start drinking recreationally, if that’s what you’re all panicking about. It was tolerable. Not good. But tolerable. The cigs were better.”

“Oh my god,” Chrome whispered. “*You liked the cigs.*”

Yuzuriha flailed toward the screen. “They corrupted him! He was normal before!”

“He was *never* normal,” Ukyo reminded her gently.

Kohaku jabbed a finger in Senku’s direction. “Do *not* let this become a habit!”

“I’m not gonna light up in a lab coat like it’s a noir film,” Senku muttered, clearly amused now.

Gen made a *sound*—something between a laugh and a cough and maybe a gasp—and immediately covered it with a throat-clear. Yuzuriha, still spiraling, didn’t notice.

Chrome didn’t notice. Kohaku was mid-rant. But *Senku* noticed. Because Gen’s face had *glitched.* Just for a second. A flicker too fast to mask. Eyes wide, mouth parted in stunned silence, as if someone had read a private page from a locked journal. And then —bam—he was smoothing it over, smile returning, casual lean back in full swing.

Too late.

Senku narrowed his eyes, one brow twitching upward. “...What?”

“*Nothing,*” Gen said way too quickly. “Just—*you*, noir film, I—wow, what an image. Trench coat, cigarette, tragic lighting. It’s just, ha, yeah—*nothing.*”

Senku didn’t look convinced.

Especially since Gen’s ears had gone red.

And neither of them said it—but in that moment, they were something close to equals. Maybe Senku shouldn't have been worried, his dad was right.

The call came in just before dawn. A terse satellite ping. Coordinates. Cluster symptoms. Unconfirmed but *strongly suspected* Zaire strain. Transmission suspected to be waterborne again—but early contact signs pointed to something *faster*. Meaner. Luis muttered a curse under his breath the moment he read the message.

"That’s the one with a ninety percent kill rate," he said grimly, snapping his pack closed.

Senku didn’t respond. He was already scanning the coordinates, overlaying them mentally with the river systems they’d mapped earlier in the month. Rajiv handed him a bottle of rehydration mix without a word. By the time the truck rolled out, the tension was suffocating. Even the air felt heavier, thicker with humidity and

dread. Trees passed in a blur, the distant echo of generators in failing clinics humming like gnats.

When they arrived, the village was already quiet.

Too quiet.

No children playing. No women at the water's edge.

The room had gone still. Even the usual low chatter, the muttered jokes, the flustered gasps—they'd all faded. It wasn't fear. It wasn't even grief yet.

It was *dread*.

Thick and cold and creeping into the spaces between their ribs. Senku's arms were crossed tight against his chest, too tight. His jaw was clenched, but not in frustration this time. His eyes hadn't left the screen—but his tapping had stopped.

Gen glanced over, slow and careful. Saw it immediately.

No tapping. No movement.

Senku was too still.

And Gen knew what that meant.

Senku exhaled, barely audible.

Just the rasp of wind and the faint, wet coughs of the dying.

Senku stepped out of the vehicle and immediately felt the ground shift beneath his shoes—not physically, but mentally. This wasn't like the other sites. This was *bad*. The tents were full. Overflow cases were being treated outside, under strips of tarp.

A woman was vomiting blood by the shade of a tree while her husband clutched her hand, murmuring prayers in a dialect Senku didn't recognize. Dr. Okoye stepped forward like she had seen it a thousand times.

Because she *had*. Senku had seen it time and time again.

"Team two is delayed. We'll triage until reinforcements get here." Her voice was steel. She turned to Senku and Rajiv. "You're on diagnostic intake and vitals. Don't touch anything you don't need to. Don't stay near a patient longer than you have to. If you smell blood in the mucus, flag me directly."

Luis had already started dragging crates toward the makeshift station. "We've got twenty-five confirmed and no refrigeration. If we don't get better med transport in six hours, this turns into a morgue."

"I need to test the stream," Senku said, pulling his kit. "It's feeding into two other districts."

"No time to go upstream," Luis warned.

"I'll take one of the bikes."

Ukyo... He had gone pale—visibly, unmistakably pale—and his hand hovered near his ear, fingers twitching like he could physically pull the sound away.

"They're begging," he said softly.

The others turned, startled.

"What?" Yuzuriha asked, barely above a whisper.

Ukyo's eyes were locked on the screen, his voice still calm—but tight at the edges. "In the background. A man begging not to be left behind. A kid asking if the doctor's coming back. A woman—she's apologizing while she's dying. She thinks it's her fault."

Kohaku's throat worked, but no sound came out.

Yuzuriha blinked, eyes stinging. “I—I didn’t hear that.”

Chrome shook his head. “Me neither.”

Gen was quiet, watching Ukyo with narrowed eyes.

Ukyo hesitated. Then said slowly, “Wait. How am I understanding them?”

Everyone turned to look at him.

Ukyo frowned, almost more disturbed now. “That village isn’t Japanese. That dialect—*none* of it should make sense to me. But I understood every word.”

And from the other side of the room, Senku—still sitting with arms crossed—finally let out a dry laugh.

“Took you long enough to ask.”

Ukyo blinked. “...What?”

Senku stretched his legs out slightly, not bothering to look smug. “Obviously I made sure everything on that screen was translated. You think future-me’s gonna build a system that shows us all this and *not* account for linguistic barriers?”

“But they were speaking Japanese,” Kohaku said, bewildered.

“No, they weren’t,” Senku replied. “They’ve been speaking English the entire time. At times, native languages that even I don't know. You’re just *hearing* it in Japanese.”

“So it’s… a translation filter?” Ukyo asked.

Senku nodded. “Exactly. Real-time contextual overlay. If the footage is meant to teach or preserve anything, it has to be *understandable.* Otherwise the entire archive’s useless.”

“But the emotions,” Yuzuriha said, hugging herself. “The voices—they feel *real.*”

“They are,” Senku said quietly. “You’re hearing it as close as possible to what I remember. That’s why it hits so hard.”

Rajiv looked like he wanted to protest, but Okoye waved him down. “Let him go. Just don’t touch the water, Senku. And don’t fall.”

He was gone in under five minutes.

When Senku returned to the triage center, Luis and Rajiv were outside, stripping gloves and suits in silence. Luis looked up—and Senku didn’t need to ask. He found a place to sit and listened, made confersatin as he wrote his notes: *Contaminants present. Spike protein profile confirms hemorrhagic properties. Not yet mutated to full respiratory—but some patients already coughing blood, so aerosol proximity is unsafe. Initial test results indicate Zaire strain. Virological curve could exceed R-naught of 2.1 if uncontained. Outbreak event may already be in Phase 2.*

“There’s a kid in there,” Luis said, not meeting anyone's eyes. “Maybe six.”

Rajiv looked pale. “We’re… trying to stabilize.”

He sat up, voice calm, controlled—his therapist voice, not his teasing one. “Senku.”

Senku didn’t look at him. “What.”

“Ada wasn’t a medical doctor,” Gen said. “So why was she in the tent?”

The question hung there, surgical and quiet.

Senku finally exhaled. “Because we didn’t have anyone else.”

That got everyone’s attention.

“She knew the science,” he continued, tone flat. “She wasn’t licensed to practice, no. But we were running two functioning med sites across five districts, and we only had one fully outfitted med bus for the entire hot zone. People were collapsing in the dirt. If you understood basic pathogenesis and could run a line or help intubate, you helped. Didn’t matter what your degree said.”

Kohaku looked horrified. “You mean it was that bad?”

“Worse,” Senku said.

His voice didn’t change—but the silence afterward made the weight land harder.

“We didn’t have enough nurses. Not enough PPE. We had one diagnostic centrifuge, and it broke twice. Luis and I had to repair it with scrap wire and duct tape in the back of a truck. We were boiling surgical tools in repurposed cooking pots. Running diagnostics on solar batteries meant for comms gear. The power grid went out every third day, so cold storage was a coin flip.”

He exhaled, slow. Didn’t blink.

“And most of the time… people didn’t even get to the tents until it was too late.”

Taiju’s smile had faded completely. Chrome’s brows were furrowed, his mouth tight. Even Ryusui was quiet now, jaw set, fingers steepled in front of his mouth. Yuzuriha’s hands had gone still in her lap.

Senku didn’t look at any of them.

He just kept watching the screen, “We didn’t just lack equipment,” he said. “We lacked time. Transportation. Trained hands. We had no backup. No rotation. No way to replace people when they burned out. And everyone burned out.”

Gen didn’t flinch. “And Ada stepped in because it was her or no one.”

Senku gave a small nod. “She never hesitated. Said if she knew how to help and didn’t use it, the guilt would be worse than the risk.”

His voice didn’t waver, but something in it shifted—firmer at the edges, like steel under pressure. Not reverence. Not grief. *Pride.* Pride in the way she thought. In the way she acted. In the kind of logic that didn’t flinch when it came to human lives.

Yuzuriha was hugging her arms. “But she wasn’t supposed to *be* in there.”

“She was never *supposed* to be in half the places she went,” Senku muttered. “But if she didn’t go, people died.”

“Where’s Dr. Okoye?” Senku asked.

“Inside.”

Senku moved toward the flap of the largest tent.

He froze in the doorway.

Okoye was kneeling next to a man on a cot—mid-40s, unconscious, blood on his shirt. She was holding his hand, checking the pulse, speaking softly to a local nurse who looked seconds from collapse. Her gloves were smeared with red. Her face shield fogged. And even though she was in the middle of chaos, *she had her fingers to her temple*—index and thumb pressing just enough to signal she was filtering the noise. Narrowing her focus.

Senku stared.

The thought hit like static through his spine: *She's still doing it. Even here. Even now.*

Yuzuriha sat with her hands in her lap, fingers curled tightly together. Her eyes hadn't left the screen.

"She's…" Her voice caught, just a little. She tried again, softer. "She's really something, isn't she?"

Beside her, Kohaku nodded slowly. "Yeah."

There was a pause.

Yuzuriha glanced around—saw Chrome still wide-eyed, Taiju looking quietly devastated, and Gen watching the screen with unreadable eyes. Then she leaned closer to Kohaku, lowering her voice to a whisper, "She would've been an amazing role model. For girls. For science. For… people like me. She wasn't trying to inspire anyone. She just existed—smart and calm and unshakable—and it made you want to be like her."

Kohaku tilted her head. "Didn't you have role models like that before?"

"Not enough," Yuzuriha whispered. "Not like her."

Kohaku frowned, her voice still quiet. “But… you had technology. Access to knowledge. Wouldn’t there be more?”

“There were,” Yuzuriha admitted. “Brilliant women. But they weren’t *seen* the same way. They had to work twice as hard to be taken seriously. And if they ever messed up, even once, it was used against *all* of us.”

Kohaku blinked. “That’s ridiculous.”

Yuzuriha gave her a small, sad smile. “You’re lucky you don’t understand that.”

Kohaku looked confused, but she listened.

“In your village,” Yuzuriha continued softly, “You were respected for being strong. Respected no matter what. You could beat the guys in a fight and no one said it made you less worthy.”

“Well, I *was* stronger,” Kohaku whispered, like it was just a fact.

“Exactly,” Yuzuriha said. “But in our world, a lot of girls got told—quietly or not—that we weren’t smart enough for science. Or not *serious* enough. That we should leave it to the men. We weren’t encouraged. We weren’t shown women like *her.* The world was slowly changing, but that sort of change takes time... Or it did, I guess. In a way you guys are more advanced than we were."

They both looked back at the screen.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment.

Then Kohaku whispered, “She would’ve been someone girls remembered forever.”

The rest of the day was a blur of field readings, temperature checks, fluid intake logs, and emergency IV attempts. Time slipped. Meals were skipped. Luis snapped at a driver. Rajiv nearly dropped a case file in a bloody basin. Senku's calculations started stacking up in his head faster than he could log them.

They didn't sleep.

They couldn't.

By the time the truck returned them to the central base that evening, no one spoke.

Not even Okoye.

But her hands shook when she unzipped her suit.

The outbreak was contained.

Barely.

The silence in the viewing room remained unbroken. No one made a joke. No one gasped. Because exhaustion wasn't dramatic. It didn't scream. It just sat in your bones and waited. And for a long moment, *everyone* felt it.

Even now.

And then, quietly—*softly*—Gen spoke.

"You know," he said, voice stripped of performance, "The body can only run on adrenaline for so long. Even the mind starts misfiring eventually. Decision fatigue. Short-term memory gaps. Disassociation."

He didn't look at anyone as he spoke. Just watched the image of Okoye, her shoulders hunched ever so slightly.

“That kind of exhaustion doesn’t scream. It doesn’t break things. It just… seeps in. Wears you down so slowly you don’t even notice the sharpness going dull.”

“You remember what she said?” he murmured, eyes still on the screen. “*I’m already rusting.*”

The words hung in the air like ash.

“She didn’t mean her body,” Gen went on, voice stripped of its usual gloss. “She meant *this.* The days that don’t end. The decisions that pile up. The patients you lose. The ones you save, but not fast enough. The way everything starts to blur, and your mind stops firing like it used to. When you live like that long enough, you don’t shatter. You just… erode. Your reactions dull. Your judgment slips. You don’t even know it’s happening until you’re standing in the middle of a tent, hands shaking, and wondering why you can’t hold a pen steady.”

“But the thing is…”

He tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing as he studied the still image of Ada on the screen, her hands trembling just after the outbreak had been contained.

“She figured something out.”

The others glanced toward him, but he wasn’t looking at them. His attention was locked on Senku—on the version of him in the footage, still scribbling, still calculating like nothing had changed.

“She realized… he doesn’t rust like the rest of us.” He said it not with admiration, but with clarity, maybe a little bit of admiration, this was Senku aftr all, “She’s in the middle of it—burned out, holding herself together with tape and instinct—and then there’s Senku, next to her. Exhausted, yeah. Overworked, *definitely*. But not unraveling. Not fading. She saw it. That there’s something in him—something in the way his brain works—that just… keeps going. Like the pressure doesn’t wear him down the same way. He *compartmentalizes* faster. Adapts harder. He doesn’t blur. He sharpens.”

Gen exhaled, just a little. Almost a laugh, almost not. It fit too, Senku's drive for new experiences made him that way, “And for her, that must’ve been… humbling. Not in a bad way. Just—real. She knew what she was seeing. Not just brilliance. *Endurance.* Mental structure that holds under pressure she spent a lifetime learning to carry. And there he was—barely sixteen, and already standing in it like it was home.”

He glanced at Senku again. This time, quietly.

“She didn’t resent it. She respected it. But I think a part of her wondered if she was already rusting… and he never would.”

Senku didn’t move. But the words sank in like sediment—layer by layer.

He doesn’t rust like the rest of us.

He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

It wasn’t praise. Not really. Gen hadn’t meant it like that. It was just an observation—cool, clinical, unnervingly accurate.

Because it was *true*.

The days blurred. The hours vanished. People broke down around him—mentally, physically—and Senku kept working. Kept calculating. Kept doing what had to be done because if *he* stopped, then things *actually* fell apart. Sometimes he liked it, far more than he enjoyed his life before facing those types of conditions... He didn’t rust. He sharpened.

Even now, years later, his fingers still tapped in seconds. Even now, part of his brain was running water purification models in the background while another catalogued the decay

rates in medical tents. Always split. Always calculating.

Senku's jaw tightened, just slightly.

He hadn't known she noticed. Hadn't thought she was watching him *like that.* But of course she had. She was the only person who'd ever known how to, Gen... Maybe Gen did that now, maybe Byakuya did sometimes. And now, she was gone. He exhaled, long and even, letting the weight of it settle somewhere behind his ribs—stored, like everything else, in a part of him that didn't get used until it was needed.

> Twenty-three cases. twenty deaths. Quarantine enforced within twenty-four hours. The rest of the team had arrived in time, the mobile labs had worked, and—miraculously—the water hadn't carried it downstream. The official report called it a victory. Senku didn't disagree. The numbers could've been *ten billion* times worse. And that was cause enough for celebration. Rajiv had stolen a speaker from somewhere—probably the med van's glove box—and set it up on an overturned cooler. Luis dragged a plastic table outside, and someone had managed to salvage a half-case of beer from a UN drop. Even Senku had to admit it was *decently chilled*, considering the state of the field freezer.
>
> Senku leaned against a support beam near the outer edge of the tent, arms folded, watching the mess of tired, laughing researchers trying not to fall asleep in their chairs.
>
> Rajiv was talking animatedly to two grad students about whether they could genetically modify mosquitoes to self-destruct. Luis kept muttering *don't give them ideas* into his cup.
>
> "Hey," Rajiv called, lifting a hand toward Senku, "You're the one who makes everything out of *sugar and metal*. Any chance you'll build us a mosquito laser grid?"
>
> "Too inefficient," Senku replied dryly. "But if you give me six copper coils, a sheet of metal, and a car battery, I can get us a basic electrified perimeter."

In the present, the group collectively *exhaled.*

Yuzuriha let out a soft laugh, hand pressed lightly to her chest. "Okay, *that's* more like him."

“It’s weird,” Chrome said, blinking. “It’s all so normal. Like they’re just… hanging out.”

“They *earned* that moment,” Ukyo said quietly. “You can feel how close it came to going the other way.”

“Is it bad that I kind of want to be there?” Kohaku asked. “I mean—not the disease part. But this part.”

“It’s not bad,” Gen said softly, lips curled into something wistful. “It’s human. When the world doesn’t end, and the beer’s cold, and the people who made it through are still breathing—that’s worth holding onto. So long as they can avoid all the mosquito based sicknesses that come from being in this area without any sort of walls around them.”

Ryusui grinned. “I could get behind field science if it comes with beer and mosquito warfare.”

Francois nodded, watching the screen thoughtfully. “Victory does not always look triumphant. Sometimes it simply means… You lived. And the world didn’t fall apart that day.”

Rajiv blinked. “Wait, seriously?”

“Stop encouraging him,” Luis groaned.

“Seriously,” Rajiv said again, laughing now. “You’ll do it, won’t you?”

Senku didn’t smile—but he *almost* did. “Only if you promise to stop coding while you’re sleep-deprived.”

“I make no such promises.”

Gen collapsed sideways on the couch. “There are *no words* for the irony.”

Ryusui grinned. “Is this satire? Are we in a satire now?”

Ukyo gave a low hum. “Well, well. He finally hit his irony quota.”

But Yuzuriha just stared at the screen for a second, lips parted in disbelief. Then—hands on her hips, eyes wide with scandal—“*Senkuu!*”

Senku glanced over, entirely unrepentant.

“You can’t *lecture* people about sleep when *you* regularly run on energy drinks and spite!” She pointed accusingly, but her tone was more fond than furious, “And you act like three days without rest is a perfectly normal science pace—what kind of example is that?”

Then, realizing she was actually scolding him in front of everyone, she broke into a giggle and covered her mouth with both hands.

“You’re ridiculous,” she mumbled behind her fingers, eyes crinkling.

Senku shrugged. “Says the girl who used to stay up reconstructing ancient dresses for a fair with a needle and four flashlight batteries.”

Yuzuriha flushed but couldn’t stop smiling. “That was different! That was *important!*”

A warm breeze passed through the clearing. Fireflies flickered along the edge of the bush. For a moment, the tension that had wrapped around all of them for the last week seemed to finally exhale. Senku glanced over the group again. Everyone was here. Rajiv, tipsy and energetic. Luis, looking vaguely haunted but better. The tech team in good spirits. Some of the local staff had even joined in.

And then—He frowned.

Dr. Okoye was seated just off to the side, cross-legged with a clipboard balanced across one knee. Still working. Her expression was composed as ever, back straight, pen moving in neat lines. But… her pace was too steady. *Too* deliberate. The way her jaw clenched—barely noticeable. The way she adjusted her sleeve like it was too tight. A tremor in her left hand she quickly hid under the clipboard.

Senku's eyes narrowed.

She hadn't touched her drink.

She hadn't joined the conversation.

And—most importantly—she hadn't laughed at Rajiv's mosquito joke. She always laughed at his dumbest ideas.

Chrome sat forward slowly, expression tightening. "She didn't touch the beer."

"Not even to pretend to sip it," Ryusui added, quieter than usual.

Ukyo's eyes narrowed. He tilted his head just slightly, gaze locked on the subtle stiffness in Ada's posture. They all knew what was going to happen, but it still made Ukyo uncomfortable. None of them looked at each other, but the shift rippled through the room like a current.

"She's holding herself too straight," Gen said, the clinical edge creeping into his tone. "That's not composure. That's compensation."

Senku crossed his arms, fingers digging in just slightly at the edge of his clothing.

Senku stepped a little closer, careful not to alert her. "You usually have a comeback when he says things like that."

Okoye didn't look up. "Didn't seem worth wasting brain power on."

"So you're conserving energy."

She glanced up then—just briefly. Her eyes were glassy. There was sweat along her temples that hadn't been there before.

Senku's pulse kicked up.

"You okay?"

Gen didn't speak. He was watching Senku—*present-day* Senku—who was sitting rigidly, eyes locked on the screen. Not blinking. Not breathing, by the look of it.

Ryusui exhaled through his nose, unusually quiet. "Damn. He clocked it immediately."

"Fifteen years old," Gen said, voice soft now, but steady. "And already reading symptoms like a field doctor... We didn't see it but I assume that at some point you were quite similar to Ada when it came to sometimes helping patients . It certainly explains some things." Like Senku's ability to play doctor a little bit too well.

Chrome whispered, "So she *was* sick. Even then."

Senku didn't say anything. But his jaw was tight. His fingers dug into his sleeves—subtle, sharp, restrained. Taiju shifted, glancing from the screen to Senku, then back again. His brows were furrowed, lips parting like he wanted to say something but didn't quite know what. He didn't *understand*—not like Chrome or Gen or Ukyo.

But he *felt* it.

And that was enough to send a ripple of panic straight through his chest.

"Hey," he said, louder than he meant to, turning toward Senku fully now. "Are you—? I mean, is something wrong?"

Senku didn't answer. Still staring at the screen. Still locked in that moment, the way he had been then. Waiting for an answer he already knew.

Taiju looked between the others, confused and growing *more* worried now. “Why’s he not saying anything? He’s—he’s not moving. He’s usually—*talking*, right? Why’s he so quiet?”

Yuzuriha reached out, touching Taiju’s arm gently. “He’s just… remembering.”

“But he’s—he’s not okay,” Taiju said, quieter this time. “Right? He’s not okay. Is there anything I can do to help, Senku?”

Gen’s expression twitched. Not a smile, not even a smirk—just something tired. And soft.

“No,” he murmured. “Not really.”

Okoye smirked faintly. “I’m just tired, Senku. That’s allowed. Even for me.”

He studied her for another beat. “You’re usually too stubborn to *admit* you’re tired.”

The smirk held, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Well. Maybe I’m learning.”

Senku didn’t push—not yet. Not here. Not with the rest of the team around. But the gears in his brain were already spinning. The strain they’d just fought off was fast. And Okoye had been right in the middle of it. *Too* in the middle of it. A small part of Senku—the part that counted heartbeats and calculated risks—logged the moment with ruthless precision.

But the rest of him?

The rest of him wanted to believe it was just fatigue.

He looked up at the night sky instead, arms folding tighter. For tonight, he let the team have their moment. He let himself hope. Let himself not follow the logic.

“...Gen.”

The mentalist looked up, immediately alert.

“What’s it called,” Senku murmured, “When someone uses your hope to convince you of something you already want to believe?”

Gen didn’t hesitate. “*Plausible reassurance.* Just enough truth to make the lie land softer.”

Senku gave the faintest nod. He already knew. Of course he did. But hearing Gen say it out loud made something shift in his chest—something too small to name, too quiet to resist. It didn’t fix anything. But it *helped. J*ust a little... Hearing Gen talk like that. Like pressing on a bruise and realizing the ache hadn’t swallowed you whole. Gen didn’t add anything. Didn’t try to offer comfort or distraction.

He just sat beside him, silent, steady.

And for now—that was enough.

Senku was the second person awake.

The first was Luis, because *of course* it was Luis, if it wasn't Okoye it was him—Senku passed him coming back from his third lap around the perimeter, sweat already darkening the collar of his field shirt. His feet hurt, but they always did. This job included a lot of walking, his dad had been right to force him to pack the compression socks, they were a daily need.

“Two tents down,” Luis grunted. “Half the team’s still asleep. Rajiv’s snoring. Someone stepped on the speaker.”

Senku nodded absently. He wasn’t listening.

His eyes were on the far tent. The one with the makeshift desk. The one Okoye always claimed before anyone else could.

She was usually the *first* one awake.

But the chair was still empty.

The fan inside the tent hummed weakly.

Senku pushed the flap open. “Dr. Okoye—”

She was slumped sideways, one hand still holding her pen, the other braced on the edge of the table like she’d tried to stand and hadn’t made it. The clipboard had fallen to the floor.

And Taiju—Taiju felt something *drop* in his chest.

That’s it, he realized. That’s when it happened. When she— He didn’t let himself finish the thought. But his throat felt tight. Because now, it made sense. Why Senku had never talked about trying to bring her back. Why he hadn’t even *tried*. Because she’d already been gone.

Too gone.

And suddenly, Taiju hated that he understood.

He didn’t say a word.

But he looked at Senku sitting beside him, completely silent.

And wished he could un-know it.

Her skin looked too pale.

Senku was at her side in three seconds. “Hey.” He tapped her arm lightly, he shouldn't, his mind was screaming at him but he did anyway, hoping, “Hey. You good?”

No response.

He checked her forehead—burning.

Checked her pupils—uneven response.

Checked her breathing—shallow.

"Luis," Senku called, sharp and sudden. "Get Rajiv. Now."

Then Chrome let out a slow breath. "Whoa."

"He moved like he already knew what was wrong," Ukyo murmured.

"He *did*," Gen said softly, almost to himself. "It took him three seconds to log three critical vitals and issue the right call. Senku would obviously be impressive no matter what field he went into, but most definitely a great medical doctor."

Ryusui leaned forward, fingers steepled, not grinning for once. "That *was* a system firing at full speed."

Chrome looked at Senku. "You didn't even hesitate."

Senku said nothing. But his fingers tapped once against his knee—seconds. Rhythmic.

Ukyo's eyes flicked to it, then back to the screen. "Well, well. Even panic gets processed like data with him."

Luis didn't hesitate. Boots pounded away from the tent. Senku grabbed his pack and pulled out a thermometer, slipping it beneath her arm while she leaned against him, head barely supported. She muttered something too low to understand, then went quiet again.

Forty degrees Celsius.

Too high.

Way too high. They didn't have any viable medical near, they were too busy with the strain thirty miles away, it would take priority over one, even if that one was

Ada -

Senku's jaw tightened. "Damn it."

"Two fully operational outbreak zones and one rolling diagnostics center?" Ryusui's gaze didn't leave the screen. "That's not a logistics issue. That's that damned funding issue coming back to bite in the ass."

Ukyo exhaled slowly. "You're not wrong."

"It's the same story everywhere. You've got people on the ground who know how to solve the problem—and no one gives them the damn tools to do it." He sat forward, eyes narrowing, voice rising like a rallying cry, "When we rebuild the world, I'm not just bringing back airships and ports and treasure maps. I want a future where these people—Ada, Senku, all of them—*never* have to fight for basic resources again. Where field labs get as much funding as defense contractors, and mobile hospitals run *twenty-four-seven* without begging for batteries."

He slammed his palm down on his knee, grinning wide and sharp.

"I want it all. Not just the luxuries—the necessities. The *infrastructure.* The science. The people who give a damn. If greed's my sin, then screw it—I'm greedy for *that* future too."

Kohaku blinked at him, visibly impressed.

Yuzuriha smiled faintly, warmth in her eyes.

Even Ukyo gave a small nod. "Well said."

Senku, arms crossed and expression unreadable, finally spoke up—dry and deadpan:

“Obviously we’re doing that. What, you thought I was rebuilding civilization *without* infrastructure?”

Ryusui barked a laugh. “Just making sure it’s still in the blueprint, partner.”

Senku rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth twitched. “Ten billion percent. Now quit making it sound like a revolutionary idea—it’s basic planetary maintenance.”

She’d worked too hard. She’d stood in the heat too long. She *knew* better. She always preached better. She knew the signs. *Why didn’t she say anything?* By the time Rajiv and Luis returned, Senku already had a cold compress to her head, a rapid test strip in hand, and a sinking certainty in his chest. Rajiv skidded into the tent and stopped short.

“No—no, no. She said she was fine last night.”

“She wasn’t,” Senku snapped, not out of anger—just frustration. “She was hiding it.”

“She didn’t even hide it that well,” Senku muttered, he sounded a little angry at himself, “She just used plausible reassurance. Told me something that sounded logical enough that I let myself believe it.”

Chrome’s eyes widened.

“You knew something was off,” Ukyo said quietly.

Senku nodded once. “Of course I did. I logged the signs. But I wanted it to be nothing. So I let her say something that made it *feel* like nothing.”

Gen’s voice was gentle. “Because if *she* was scared, it meant it was already too late.”

Luis crouched beside the cot they’d laid her on. “Test?”

Senku nodded. “Running now.”

They waited.

Rajiv sat with his hands in his hair.

Luis muttered something in Spanish under his breath.

The indicator strip lit up faintly. Then clearly.

Then red.

Zaire ebolavirus.

Confirmed.

Yuzuriha closed her eyes, covering her mouth with one hand.

Gen shifted beside him. “Senku—”

“I should’ve called it sooner. Maybe we could’ve—”

“No,” Gen said firmly. No smile. No deflection. Just calm, quiet authority. Not unkindly, but sternly, “You *did* call it. You moved fast. You did everything right. It just… wasn’t enough.”

Senku didn’t respond.

Didn’t argue either.

Just kept staring.

Gen let the silence stretch, then leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, mirroring him. “Listen to me, Scientist. You don’t get extra points for torturing yourself.”

Still no answer.

Gen exhaled. “Alright. That’s it. Long past time for a break for the night.”

Senku’s brow twitched, just slightly. “We’re in the middle of—”

“Of *nothing*,” Gen cut in gently. “The screen’s paused. The world won’t explode if you take ten minutes."

One by one, the crew began to move—quietly, instinctively.

Ukyo slipped down the corridor toward the starboard viewing deck, his steps almost soundless. Chrome muttered something about needing to check the water filtration readings, though no one asked for proof. Ryusui turned sharply toward the engine room, muttering about diagnostics with a little too much focus to be casual. Francois followed him, silent as ever, but with a glance over the group that felt like silent acknowledgment of what they were all holding.

Kohaku gave Yuzuriha a soft nudge and motioned toward the garden deck—quiet company, no talking needed.

Taiju hesitated the longest, casting a worried look at Senku’s back, but Yuzuriha caught his sleeve and gently tugged him away.

No one said they were leaving Senku and Gen alone.

But they all did.

Senku turned without a word, heading deeper into the ship.

Gen followed.

The back of the vessel held what passed for their personal lab space—wedged between a backup power conduit and three storage lockers full of half-labeled equipment. Over time, the space had grown cluttered with blueprints, spare wiring, soldered circuits, and two mismatched mugs that never seemed to get returned to the galley.

Senku pushed open the door and stepped inside, the faint smell of chemicals setteling around them. It was comforting to Senku, even if just slightly, the hard line of his shoulders softened a little bit. He stood there for a long second. Then, in a tone so neutral it bordered on monotone, “We should install a bunk bed in here.”

Gen blinked. “A bunk bed.”

Senku nodded once, not looking back. “Top for storage overflow. Bottom for whoever’s actually sleeping in the AM hours, probably you. Could rig a power strip into the ladder frame.”

He crossed to the bench and began rearranging a set of scattered copper coils like they needed organizing. They didn’t.

Gen leaned in the doorway, eyebrow arching. “*Both* of us sharing the lab, huh?”

Senku didn’t answer.

Gen stepped inside fully, letting the door slide shut behind him. Putting on his best joking voice, even though it wasn't fully a joke, “You do realize you're the one who keeps escalating this, right? Don't give a man so much hope Senku-chan~!?”

Senku dropped into his chair, leaned back, and dragged one hand through his hair with a tired exhale. If he was really out of place, the Mentalist would let him know, right? “Scientific necessity. Need two people in the lab, anything could go wrong and you might need a second hand. This is fine within our current framework, right?"

“Sure,” Gen said lightly, pulling a stool toward him and spinning it once before sitting. “That’s what everyone says right before they move in together.”

Senku made a face. “You’re insufferable.”

Gen gave a small grin. “And yet, here I am. Still in your lab. Still taking up precious floor space.”

Senku didn’t argue. The silence settled comfortably, the low hum of the lab equipment filling the background. Senku spun a screwdriver idly in one hand, gaze pointedly *not* on Gen, “You gonna make another joke about cohabitation or what?”

Gen gave a soft huff. “I was considering saving it for when you start drawing up schematics for a shared toothbrush holder.”

Senku snorted—just barely—but didn’t take the bait. Another quiet moment passed. Then Senku reached over and flicked the power for a beaker off with a practiced movement. “You said you had questions,” he said, too casually. “About petrification. Consciousness. Neural mechanics. That whole thing.”

Gen looked at him—really looked.

Senku wasn’t faking enthusiasm.

Not entirely. The dullness in his eyes had faded just slightly, replaced by something eager, even a little restless. It wasn’t false. It was real. Because this part—*this part*—was science. Hypothesis, memory, theory. Things he could diagram. Map. Prove.

Control.

Gen didn't push.

He didn't say *I know what you're doing* or *You're avoiding thinking about her.* He just leaned forward on the stool, hands loosely folded, and offered a small, genuine smile.

"Right," he said. "You *did* give me permission to psychoanalyze the first conscious case in 3,700 years. Be rude not to take advantage."

Senku's expression flickered—something between amusement and relief.

"So?" he prompted, a little too quickly. "What do you want to know first? Memory retention curves? Time dilation? I tried a few self-tracking methods, but they break down around year twenty—"

Gen laughed, soft and real. "Senku-chan, breathe."

Senku blinked. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are."

And he was.

Not completely. But for now—for *this* moment—Gen would let him redirect. Because it *wasn't* all deflection. It was also joy. The kind only science could pull out of him. And Gen would always make space for that, too. *Interesting,* he thought, *that this is the trauma he'll talk about. The one that's cold and clinical and doesn't feel like her.* Still,

he didn't say it. Instead, he let the flicker of recognition pass, and gave a theatrical flourish of one hand—pulling a ragged little notebook from his sleeve like a magic trick.

Senku blinked. "Seriously?"

"What, you thought I'd *wing it?*" Gen said, tone light but with a spark of something sharper beneath. "This is uncharted psych territory, darling. You're a once-in-history case study."

He flipped it open, pages scrawled with cramped, looping shorthand.

Senku actually looked *delighted.*

Gen made a show of licking his finger and turning the page. "Alright. Starting simple: do you remember *how* you realized you were awake? Was it visual, auditory, or internal?"

Senku answered immediately. "Internal. Full-body awareness came before sensory. Vision came last. Vision in a given definition of the word, just black, darkness, void."

Gen scribbled something. "Good. And did you experience time distortion from the start? Or did it creep in later?"

"Later. I think adrenaline front-loaded my brain into short-term mode. I made the choice to count not even an hour in to realizing what happened. Felt normal for the first few weeks. Then…" Senku blinked, then refocused. "Then I started repeating equations in my head. Over and over. Parallel thinking. I picked one I already knew, and I tried to see how many times I could mentally solve it before my memory glitched."

Gen jotted that down, too, expression unreadable.

Senku continued, “I also used prime numbers. Counting them, identifying gaps, calculating factorial sequences. Later, I started reconstructing known chemical formulas —molecular weight estimates by memory. Held me longer than counting ever did.”

Gen scribbled furiously. “Alright, math as grounding. Excellent. And were there hallucinations?”

Senku didn’t pause. “Some.”

“Frequency?”

“Low, but increased in years thirty to fifty. Mostly auditory. Phantom voices. Less like hearing someone else, more like hearing *myself* think wrong.”

Gen looked up at that, but didn’t comment.

Just underlined something.

Senku leaned forward now, more alert, the lines of exhaustion still on his face—but overridden by momentum. Curiosity. That spark behind his eyes flaring back to life.

“What else?” he asked, almost eager.

Gen tilted his head, already flipping to the next scribbled page. “Sleep cycles. Did your brain simulate anything like rest?”

Senku hummed, thoughtful. “Early on, I think my brain tried to mimic REM cycles, but I’d always reassert wakefulness too soon. I think if I had fallen into that there was the chance I would actually fall into the darkness, lose count. Couldn't let that happen, and after awhile, my brain stopped trying. Probably around 30 years in at maximum but I would have to check the numbers if you want exact dates."

He said it casually.

Gen didn't flinch.

Just kept writing.

"Any emotional surges you can recall? Panic? Grief spikes? Rage?"

Senku shrugged. "Briefly. They passed. I could suppress most of it by focusing on math."

Gen arched an eyebrow. "So… emotion-stacking bypassed by logic substitution?"

Senku nodded. "Exactly."

"You're terrifying," Gen muttered, flipping to the next page.

"Thank you."

Gen shifted on the stool, fluid and deliberate, folding one leg neatly over the other. The ragged little notebook stayed balanced against his thigh, and when he looked up again, his entire demeanor had shifted. Gone was the teasing smirk. Now he looked… *professional*. Smart. Like he *belonged* in this kind of space—asking these questions, guiding this conversation. His tone was measured, calm. His body language open but precise.

"Let's go a bit deeper," he said, voice smooth but grounded. "You mentioned you could suppress emotions with logic substitution. Did it always work?"

Senku blinked. “Ninety percent of the time. The brain likes patterns. I just had to give it one.”

“And the other ten?”

A pause.

Senku looked away. “The numbers didn’t always stick. Especially when I hit memory loops. Emotional triggers broke through more often then.”

Gen nodded, jotting that down. “Loops of what?”

Senku hesitated. “Things I knew I couldn’t fix. People I couldn’t help.”

His voice didn’t waver, but his fingers resumed that familiar rhythm on his leg—tapping in seconds.

Gen didn’t push further.

He just looked at him with those focused, *clinical* eyes.

“Your ability to self-regulate under extended isolation is… honestly, unprecedented. You understand that, right?”

Senku’s lips quirked. “I like being first.”

Gen smiled back—smaller this time. “You like being understood.”

And Senku's pulse jumped. He covered it quickly. Sat straighter. Looked back at the screen as if it held more data, but there was nothing playing. Because the lab was quiet now. Just the fizzle of some chemicals still on a low burn. And *Gen.* Sitting there, looking like the most dangerous kind of stability—*precise and patient.*

Senku cleared his throat. "What's the next question?"

Gen uncrossed his legs just enough to flip a page, slow and deliberate. "Sensory detachment. Let's talk about how you experienced your body—or the lack of it—over time."

Senku nodded, eyes flicking back with renewed intensity. But *he'd noticed* the shift. And he hated how aware of it he suddenly was. Because Gen wasn't just smart. He was *studying him*. And Senku wasn't sure who was actually leading Gen flipped the page with one hand, uncrossing his legs slowly and sitting straighter now, the edge of the notebook resting lightly against his knee.

"You know," he said, almost casually, "What you described with the memory loops… I had something like that. During petrification."

Senku glanced over, more curious than surprised.

Gen didn't wait for a prompt.

"I stayed conscious," he said, tone light but even. "For a long time. I don't know exactly how long—it blurred around the thirty-year mark. But I remember reciting my own book still to keep track, but it was faint..." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "Every word I could recall. Over and over again. I rewrote chapters in my head, edited them, reversed sentence order just to keep myself from unraveling."

Senku's breath caught—but he didn't speak.

He *listened*.

Gen continued, his fingers absently tapping his pencil against the notebook—not in seconds, not measured, just natural, “I think the human brain, when deprived of stimulus, starts eating its own structures. Like sleep deprivation, but stretched out over decades. Your hippocampus fights to stay sharp, but eventually, it starts dropping connections—so your memory compensates by forming loops. Repetitions. Fixations. Emotional anchors.”

He looked up then, eyes catching Senku’s. “The things you remembered? The people you couldn’t help? That’s because your brain prioritized emotional imprint over abstract data. It *had* to. Or you’d have lost sense of time entirely. Even if you were consistently counting in parallel."

Gen leaned in just slightly—not close, not intentionally flirty—but the proximity was enough to tilt the gravity in the room.

“I think your method worked because it paired cognitive exercise with emotional suppression. Which is rare. Most people either go full emotional dissociation or cling to one sharp memory and burn out.”

He paused.

“But *you* built a pattern.”

He said it like a discovery. And Senku… Senku was *gone.* The way Gen spoke. The cadence. The way he wove logic into psychology, made sense of the abstract, layered trauma with cold, beautiful precision. Senku knew it was *real.* And that was the problem. Because this wasn’t just someone listening to him. This was someone who *understood* the exact weight of what he’d endured—and explained it *better than he could himself.*

He opened his mouth—then shut it again.

There was nothing to say.

Just a low hum in his bloodstream and the quiet, dangerous realization:

He was *completely, utterly* gone for this man. Senku's momentum had slowed—not abruptly, but in subtle, precise ways Gen knew how to read. The focus hadn't left, but it had *fractured*. His answers had become shorter, his gaze less steady.

And Gen?

Gen felt it click into place.

Senku wasn't just uncomfortable because of the *content*.

It was *him*.

Gen, talking neuroscience. Gen, dissecting psychological trauma like a thesis defense. Gen, doing exactly what he was trained to do—*well.* That last explanation had done something to Senku. The pulse shift. The eyes narrowing like they were trying to recalculate something internal. Senku was attracted to it. Gen saw it. And now Senku was *panicking* about it. The same way that he always seemed to. So Gen closed the notebook slowly and sat back, folding one leg over the other with a smooth, deliberate grace that was *definitely* not accidental.

Then, after a pause—

"You know," he said lightly, "If I can survive *that* look you gave me earlier, you can survive me monologuing about your hippocampal survival adaptations."

Senku's eyes snapped to him, sharp.

Gen smiled—not wide. Not smug. Just a little curve at the corner of his mouth that said *I see you.*

"You know the one," He went on, tilting his head slightly. "The one that made me forget how to count for two entire seconds. Slow. Calculated. Like you were about to pin a dissertation to my chest and call it foreplay."

Senku exhaled hard through his nose, cheeks warming despite his best efforts.

"That," Gen continued, tapping the notebook against his knee, "Was so illegal it should've come with a warning label."

"I was proving a point," Senku muttered.

"Oh, you proved *several*," Gen shot back, grin widening. "Which is why you don't get to look at me like *this* is somehow more indecent than *that.*"

Senku didn't respond—but the twitch at his jaw, the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes dropped for *just* a second? Yet somehow seemed even more grounded?

Confirmed.

Gen had hit the nerve.

But more importantly—he'd defused the spiral.

He leaned forward again, smile softening as he flipped open the notebook once more. “Alright, Professor. Back to science?”

Senku gave a small grunt. “Back to science.”

But Gen could feel it now—that hum in the air. Gen kept the notebook open, letting his pen move slowly across the page, but his mind was *elsewhere*. Not distracted. Just… recalibrating. Because Senku was leaning forward again. Engaged. Curious. *Fascinated*. But there was something else layered underneath it—something reactive. The way his breath caught when Gen got precise with his language. The way his eyes lingered a beat too long when Gen sat a certain way, or tilted his head to think.

It was *pure attraction Senku was showing.*

And Gen felt his pulse quicken—not with nerves, but with *opportunity. So… he’s into smart. I knew that. Not surprising. He’s Senku. But he’s not just listening—he’s reacting. Which means… maybe the rules aren’t as solid as he thinks they are.* And Gen remembered their last real conversation—the one where Senku had admitted, in that quiet, raw voice, that this *wasn’t* casual for him. That he couldn’t offer anything more. That flirting was fine as long as Gen didn’t mistake it for anything heavier.

At the time, Gen had taken him at his word.

But *this*?

This felt different.

He was *testing variables*.

How far can I take this before he realizes he wants to cross his own line? What happens if I keep the science intact… but layer in just enough charge to scramble his emotional firewall?

He flipped to a blank page and spoke casually, like none of that had been swirling behind his eyes, “Alright, next question: Did your long-term memory stabilize better around concrete facts or emotional memory? Because if it’s the latter, you might’ve retained more because of, say, specific attachments.”

Senku blinked. “Define ‘specific attachments.’”

Gen didn’t miss the shift in tone.

He smiled. “Oh, you know. People you couldn’t stop thinking about. Individuals who maybe had unusually symmetrical bone structure. Razor-sharp minds. Killer cheekbones. Maybe your perfect recall could bring that memory to the forefront even if you never met them before petrification... Released pop-psych books but amazing dissertations that you annotated?”

Senku’s ears pinked. “Gen—”

“For *science,*” Gen said innocently, resting his chin on his hand.

And when Senku *glared* at him—not actually mad, just overloaded—Gen bit back a grin and added, a little more softly, “Hey, I’m just saying… if I can survive *that* look you gave me last week, you can survive a few inconvenient compliments.”

"Are you going to use that look to reason everything you say now?" Senku asked half sufferingly he didn’t deny it.

Didn’t retreat either.

That silence? That little flicker of breath?

Gen *clocked* it.

Okay, he thought, *so we're getting closer.*

This was going to take time. Patience. Precision.

Time slipped in the way it only does when two brilliant minds are circling the same orbit.

The lab's overhead light hummed softly, casting a gentle glow across scattered blueprints and the open sprawl of Gen's notebook—now filled with dense, scribbled notes, half-legible diagrams, and margins stacked with side theories and Senku's muttered corrections. The hours bled together. Senku hadn't looked at the clock once. He was *enthralled*. Every time Gen offered a new theory, Senku fired back a counterpoint. Every time Senku unraveled a model for psychological patterning under temporal isolation, Gen asked how it could be tested, challenged, or weaponized. And through it all, that low, constant buzz hummed beneath the surface. Not loud. Not distracting.

But *there.*

And at some point—neither of them quite sure when—Senku shifted in his seat, leaned in toward the next page of Gen's notes, and pressed their ankles together beneath the bench.

Not hard.

Not even noticeable if you weren't paying attention.

But *deliberate.*

Gen didn't react at first—didn't dare.

He just kept writing, kept nodding, kept the conversation going with a smooth, calm rhythm… while every neuron in his body screamed *yes.*

It was working.

Gen couldn't help the little flicker of a grin as he turned a page and tapped his pen against the margin.

"So you're saying your memory stabilized after the twentieth year because you were repeating sensory triggers?"

Senku nodded, still laser-focused. "Yeah. Auditory first. Breath pattern, then heartbeat. Then I created an internal metronome and mapped equations onto it."

Gen jotted that down, all while very much *not* looking at their ankles still pressed together. "And what about after year fifty?"

Senku leaned forward. Their knees bumped now.

"Visuals kicked in again. Recreated star maps. Built constellations. Projected movement patterns. It helped with orientation."

Gen nodded, flipping to a fresh page. "And by that point, you didn't even think in days anymore, just the seconds passively in the background."

“Yes,” Senku said. “It was all rhythm. Cadence. Sequence.”

“Language?”

"That stayed pretty consistent but I do think that all of the thinking in English actually helped me with my accent, not sure if that's useable data, but it was fascinating.”

Gen made a quiet, fascinated sound. Senku glanced sideways. Gen’s eyes were on the page—but the smile tugging at his mouth wasn’t for the data.

It was for *him*.

Senku looked away quickly, cheeks faintly flushed.

And Gen thought, *ohhh, this might actually work.*

He’d expected months. Maybe years.

But Senku—*Senku* had just let his body speak in the way he couldn’t with words.

And Gen?

Gen could wait as long as it took.

Because the plan was simple now:

Keep the science going.

Keep the contact low and steady.

Senku flipped a page, started scribbling out a neural feedback diagram—and couldn't stop thinking about the fact that Gen hadn't moved his leg.

Their ankles were still touching.

Still.

It had to be accidental on his own part. Except keeping it *wasn't*. Nothing about Gen was ever accidental. The way he smiled when Senku got excited about protein decay? *Not* accidental. The way he'd adjusted his glasses just now before asking a question about long-term memory in trauma survivors? *Illegal.* Senku's brain was screaming. But only internally. Externally he looked perfectly calm. Also, where the fuck did the mentalist even GET glasses, Senku was ten billion percent sure that his vision was 20/20.

Okay, he told himself. *It's fine. We had a system. We had rules. "Flirty friends." That's what we agreed on. No emotional weight. No crossing lines. Just occasional chaos in a controlled environment. A casual… flirtatious simulation of something like attraction. For enrichment purposes.*

His pen twitched.

Gen made a low "mmm" sound as he jotted something down, and Senku's brain imploded.

Okay but WHAT IS THIS NOW.

This is not "casual." This is not even "enrichment." This is full-on tactical intimacy and I didn't account for THAT variable. Did we move the line? Did I move it? Did he? What is this—flirty friends with shared oxygen saturation? Friends who tap ankles in silence while talking about hippocampal stress adaptation? Are we still following the friend agreement or have we wandered into a subclause that no longer has definitions? WHERE IS THE LINE. WHERE DID THE LINE GO.

"—Senku?"

He blinked. Gen was watching him—gentle, curious, not suspicious. Yet.

"Sorry," Senku muttered. "Got caught up thinking about neurotransmitters."

"Understandable," Gen said smoothly. "I have that effect on people."

Senku groaned internally.

I'm going to die in this lab. This is how it ends. Death by intelligent teasing and subtle ankle pressure. Someone document this. For science. By the time they finally stopped talking, the lights in the lab had dimmed to standby and Gen's notebook was barely legible beneath layers of scrawl, arrows, and a small stain from where Senku had reached for a bottle of water and missed.

Senku didn't even realize how long they'd been at it until the ship's internal lights shifted—just slightly. The pre-dawn cycle kicking in. A low, ambient hue that told them morning was only a breath away. Gen yawned, arm draped lazily over the back of his stool, his posture too slouched now to be considered anything but exhausted. His hair was mussed. His pen had slipped somewhere under the bench. He hadn't moved to find it.

Senku was still sitting up, blinking too slowly.

"…We stayed up all night," he said flatly.

"Mmhm," Gen mumbled, eyes closed. "Science blackout. Tragic, really."

"You didn't even *pretend* to take a break."

"You were cute when you were on a roll."

Senku didn't answer.

But their ankles were still pressed together.

Eventually, Gen let his head fall against the padded wall beside the console. His voice dropped to a murmur. "We've got, what… two hours before they start the next playback? Cool. Wake me in sixty. I want at least ten minutes to pretend I have social energy."

Senku huffed through his nose—something between a laugh and a breath—and leaned back just slightly. His neck hurt. His brain buzzed. But… He was calm. No equations rattling like gunfire in the back of his skull. No ghosts crowding his oxygen. Just the soft hum of monitors, the warmth of another body nearby, and the quiet *absence* of dread.

And that?

That had everything to do with Gen.

He glanced sideways. Gen was already asleep—one arm tucked loosely beneath his head, breathing soft and even. The notebook had fallen shut on his lap. Senku let himself watch him for a moment longer than necessary. Then he pulled a spare blanket from the

supply shelf, draped it over both their legs like it was a casual gesture, pressing their legs close together again and allowed his eyes to close.

Just sixty minutes.

Later, when the ship buzzed awake with system alerts and Chrome's voice echoed down the corridor yelling something about playback starting soon, Senku sat up slowly, joints stiff, head full of cotton—but his mind was clear. And as Gen yawned beside him, stretching like a cat and blinking blearily at the clock, Senku felt the tug of something quieter than panic. Softer than guilt.

Gratitude.

For the quiet. For the science. For the silence Gen had held just long enough to make the weight easier to carry.

But the moment didn't last.

Senku nudged Gen's shoulder. "Up. Playback starts in eight minutes."

Gen groaned into his sleeve. "Tell them to postpone history. I'm busy being horizontal."

"You'll be horizontal forever if you miss it," Senku deadpanned, already reaching for the nearest tablet to check the room sync. "I doubt that I would have sent this pack if it wasn't pivotal."

Gen sat up slowly, hair sticking out in three different directions. "Ugh. Why does science hurt."

“You stayed up all night talking about memory drift patterns and cortical resilience, that’s why it hurts.”

“…Ah. Right. Worth it.” He blinked, then perked. “Wait—did we ever come up with a plan for Taiju and Yuzuriha?”

Senku paused. “Damn it.”

Gen clicked his tongue. “Figures. We invent a pseudo-neural theory of petrification adaptation, but we forget to play matchmaker for our resident cinnamon rolls.”

Senku gave him a flat look. “We’re running on two hours of sleep I think we have some excuse. The science is more important anyway. Those two idiots can wait.”

“Excuses,” Gen said lightly, already pulling a small notepad from his sleeve like it had been waiting there the entire time, Senku didn't even notice when he had put it back in there, which was impressive as always, “Alright, speed round. Two geniuses, one hallway walk. Let’s scheme.”

Senku muttered, “Ten billion percent not a genius in this specific field.”

Gen grinned. “Please. You engineered a fake murder to manipulate an empire. You can fake a casual conversation that leads Taiju into confessing.”

Senku was already pulling on his coat. “Fine. But if he panics and starts talking about how Yuzuriha doesn’t have a—”

“*Don’t even finish that sentence,*” Gen warned, pointing dramatically as he stood. They headed for the playback room, still half-buttoning shirts and muttering strategies under their breath, like two men preparing for a scientific conference and a high school

romcom at the same time. As they stepped into the corridor, Senku glanced sideways, just once.

"…You good?"

Gen straightened his collar, smiled faintly. A little hopeful, which Senku had no idea where that had come from.

"Yeah," he said. "Thanks to you."

Senku was a little confused, he could have sworn that HE was the one who owed gen HIS mental health for last night.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!!!!

I was GOING to release this chapter yesterday but decided on something cute to release for our favourite Mentalists B-Day, and left this one for Taiju's B-Day. Honestly I'm so torn because I feel like the interlude is really fucking with the relationship progression that I originally had, becuase I planned out all their relationship beats for certain things in the story, but then this whole section is taking up more than I thought so I'm editing the plans as I go.

It feels weird to not follow my outline but FUCK IT IF IT WORKS IT WORKS!

Thank you to everyone who left me a comment on the last few works. I'm definitely going to reply to them but I have to go to work so it was reply to everyone or set this out for you guys.

Next chapter in less than a week. Suffer more. Honestly its almost a good thing that Ao3 doesn't allow enough room for it to have been all in one chapter cuz lord knows everyone would have quite on me with the fucking 100k chapter it would have been.

Lmao like, 5k of just our boys being sussy and trying to work out more of their shit at the end.

I swear tho, that I won't include another interlude after Ebola Arc until the death scene everyone is looking forward to.

PPS: me and my partner just finished the first season of Link Click but everything I've seen is basically telling me I'm not ready for what is about to happen to my boys this sucks.

Chapter 14: Interlude Three - Ebola Arc Part Three

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's late guys!

Explanation and prewarnings!

I know that some of you saw on tumblr but I had an issue where I ended up deleting the chapter and had to rewrite it. I am in no way happy with this, it's not as good as the original and it's done like five thousand words from the original but everything I add in just feels akward now. I give up and give you the chapter so that I can just go on in PEACE. It's so hard to write the grief section already and to ahve to rewrite it has everything feeling wrong.

Prewarning: This one FEELS very repetitive, there is only so many ways you can have them react to like 3 chapters of Senku grief. The first version was so much better than this one at this but I just can't justify not putting this out and taking longer at this point.

IMPORTANT: I don't blame you if you don't want to read this one. If that is the case this is the important relationship notes - Bascially just Senku getting more used to touch from Gen in general, Ukyo and Ryusui mentioning or teasing the relationship.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They didn’t head to the playback room right away.

Technically, they had time. Five minutes. Maybe six if they walked slowly and pretended not to notice how quiet the corridors had gotten.

Senku, still in his usual dress coat thingie and adjusted the fold of his coat absently as they walked. His hair stuck out more than usual—crazed on one side from sleep—and his stride had that sluggish quality that meant his brain had been running miles while his body stayed still. Next to him, Gen looked entirely too put together for someone who’d only slept max two hours. His hair was artfully messy. His walk was smooth. His voice, when it came, was already back to full flirtatious clarity.

“So,” Gen began, “Still on board with Operation Cinnamon Roll Nudge? I say we ease Taiju into emotional awareness with a few subtle observations and maybe a pointed compliment

from Yuzuriha.”

Senku muttered, “We’ll need a fire extinguisher for how hot his face will get. Still not sure why I can't just outright tell both of them that they like one another."

“That’s part of the charm - Also, that can be our last resort.”

They reached a quiet junction and slowed their pace—neither of them in any hurry to walk into the playback room and watch what they both knew was coming.

Gen leaned briefly against the bulkhead, eyes sliding toward Senku as he pretended to adjust his sleeve. “And you know, for someone who claims to hate meddling, you sure lit up when we started plotting their romantic trajectory.”

Senku made a noncommittal noise. He didn’t answer.

But his fingers had found the edge of his coat again, brushing rhythmically at the fabric.

The dread was settling back in. Familiar. Tight. Too close to the bones.

“I don’t…” he began, then caught himself. His voice was low, dry.

Normally I wouldn't say something like this out loud... So why am I? he thought. He didn’t mentally answer that question. Didn’t need to. He already knew the answer, even if he wasn’t about to voice it. There was something about *last night*—about talking to Gen, not around him. Letting the questions be about *him* for once. Letting someone see the parts of his mind he usually kept locked behind purpose and progress. He wasn’t used to that. And it had made this… easier.

Gen, of course, clocked it instantly. He didn’t grin. Didn’t tease. Just tucked that observation neatly into his mental notes and *internally screamed with delight*. *There it is,* he thought.

Intimacy breakthrough: logged. Line movement: confirmed. Relationship forecast: maybe within the next decade if he doesn't short-circuit first.

"I don't…" Senku started, then hesitated again. His voice was quieter now. "We're going to watch her die."

His voice didn't break. It wasn't even particularly sad—just clinical. Tired.

Gen's own smile faded. He nodded once, not trying to fill the silence.

Senku blinked slowly. *I wouldn't have said that yesterday,* he repeated to himself again, mildly alarmed now, a little more awake.

But somehow… he didn't regret saying it now.

They started walking again—slower, now.

And Gen didn't say anything clever. Didn't press. He just walked beside Senku, close enough to match his pace. Close enough that their shoulders nearly brushed.

Senku stared ahead at the hall stretching toward the playback room.

Eventually, they started walking again—slowly, side by side, the quiet stretching between them. And Senku could feel it—the weight crawling back in. The part of his brain already preparing to catalogue every detail of her final hours. Every second of her trying to help. Every moment she didn't stop.

"This fucking sucks," he said quietly.

Gen didn’t reply with words.

He just walked a little closer, shoulder nearly brushing Senku’s as they turned the final corner.

The playback room was dim when they entered, low amber lights casting soft shadows across the floor. Most of the others were already there—Chrome fiddling with a tangle of copper wire, Ukyo leaning back in a chair near the corner with his eyes half-lidded but alert, Yuzuriha and Kohaku seated close together, still speaking in quiet tones. Taiju was holding two cups of tea, clearly trying to decide if he should offer one to Yuzuriha or combust on the spot. The only ones missing were Ryusui and Francois.

Senku stepped in first, Gen just behind him. Neither said much as they moved toward their usual spot. As they sat, Gen crossed one leg over the other with casual grace. Senku settled in beside him, arms folded, eyes already locked on the screen—even though it hadn’t activated yet.

There was a beat of silence as the room adjusted around their presence.

Then—

The door hissed open.

“Good *morning,* my beautiful people!” Ryusui’s voice rang out like a champagne cork, echoing through the steel corridor behind him as he strode in with all the confident energy of a man arriving exactly when he *meant* to. Francois moved in his shadow - as per usual for them.

“Apologies for the delay,” He added with a grin, pushing up one sleeve. “Had to make sure François wasn’t planning a coup without me. Can't let them have all the fun!”

Chrome snorted. “We were about to start without you.”

Which, Senku would note, was a blatant lie. It wasn't like they had an unpause button, the thing was programmed with memories of all of them, and knew to unpause when the time was right. It as based more on vibe than anything physical, and absolutely would not unpause until Ryusui and Francois were here as well.

Ryusui waved him off like the suggestion was offensive. Them with just enough of a grin to show that he wasn't completely serious, “Please. Like you guys would do this without me."

He slid into his usual seat near the back, stretching out like a cat who’d just won a diplomatic negotiation with gravity. Francois sitting next to Ryusui silently, with their typical all too professional flair.

Gen tilted his head toward Senku and whispered just loud enough for him to hear: “Fashionably late and zero percent subtle. Just like that Captain of ours.”

Senku didn’t reply, but the faint twitch at the corner of his mouth said he wasn’t *completely* immune to it. His shoulders settled just a little lower, arms still crossed—but tighter now. Less casual. His gaze drifted toward the screen again, and this time, there was no focus behind it. Just tension. Now that everyone was seated, there were no more excuses. No more detours. No more matchmaking plans or science banter to fill the silence.

The playback would start again any second.

> Senku sat back slowly, heart still pounding but mind already moving. Containment protocols. Emergency contacts. Sample records. Chain of custody. Risk spread. Timeline. Oxygen supply. Antivirals. The whole flowchart flickered to life behind his eyes. But another voice cut through it all. A quieter, older voice.
>
> *You’re not here to make coffee or play intern. You’re here because I want to see how your brain works under pressure.*
>
> Well, she was about to find out.
>
> And so was he.

The change of energy was quick, as they all remembered where they had left off and were thrown immediately back into the thick of it. Chrome was hunched forward in his seat, eyes locked on the screen. Ukyo sat straighter now, no trace of ease in his posture. Taiju clutched his knees, his face open, worried—but silent. Yuzuriha didn't blink. Her lips pressed together like she was holding something back. Even Ryusui, usually unshakable, had gone quiet, one hand resting against his jaw as he stared. His usual energy had simmered down into something grim.

Everyone felt it.

This was going to be bad.

Finally, Kohaku broke the silence, her voice low but sure.

"Well… at least Senku is really good in an emergency."

A few heads turned toward her.

She meant it. She meant it completely.

But her voice faltered just slightly at the end, and her eyes didn't leave the screen.

Two Days Later
Research Station Quarantine Tent – 4:19 A.M.

The room stank of bleach and desperation. The isolation protocols were airtight. The moment the rapid test confirmed Zaire, Senku had personally activated their full containment protocol. Rajiv had gone quiet. Luis stopped cracking jokes. Everything had shifted. They knew the chances were low. They knew that they had very limited supplies. They knew the med bus was too far out.

But Senku?

Senku *moved*.

Full PPE. Clean suits. Double-glove layering. Negative pressure tents. IV fluids. Electrolyte balancing. A controlled cooling blanket made from ice packs scavenged from three separate NGOs. Every twenty-five minutes, he rotated her. Checked vitals. Adjusted saline. Logged symptoms. Sanitized every inch of the tent. He administered every antiviral they had. Monitored O2 saturation, liver enzyme levels, clotting factor decay. He did *everything right*.

Then Francois spoke, tone even and composed.

"Note the IV placement," They said, voice low but perfectly clear. "Despite the patient's declining vascular integrity, he's using the crook of the arm—less prone to shifting with minor movement, and optimal for fluid uptake." Their eyes followed Senku's movements with precision. "He's keeping the tent humidity high. That slows viral aerosolization. And the saline? He's not pushing it aggressively—he's compensating for electrolyte loss slowly to prevent further cardiac strain."

Chrome blinked, wide-eyed. "How do you *see* all that?"

Francois didn't look away from the screen. "He's layering his procedures. That's what makes it exceptional. PPE, negative pressure, sanitization—all while monitoring internal organ function in a makeshift triage center. It's… textbook battlefield medicine with field improvisation."

Even Ryusui was silent now, eyes fixed on Francois. And though he didn't say a word, the glint in his gaze was clear.

Pride.

That's my butler.

Francois continued, calm and unwavering. "He's creating redundancy in every move—double gloves to reduce tear risk during decontamination, blanket intervals calculated

around her fever curve, vitals logged to track progression timing, not just decline. This isn't panic medicine. This is structure."

They finally paused. "He's young. Never the less this is impressive work, and I am quite certain that no one could have done better in these circumstances."

Gen leaned forward, eyes narrowing on the butler. It was clear then, that Francois was attempting comfort here, letting Senku know that he had done everything that he could by pointing out everything that was done correctly, and from anything that Gen could see, they weren't wrong. Gen doubted that Senku would actually allow those words to reach him, but he was more than willing to try, "And running on zero sleep. Look at the bruised look under his eyes. The slowed blink rate. That's at least thirty hours without rest."

Francois gave a quiet hum of agreement. "He's pushing the physiological limit. But keeping himself upright with stimulant pacing—possibly caffeine, maybe cortisol spikes. Likely hasn't eaten either."

Senku, still watching the screen with flat eyes and a jaw too tight, shifted just slightly. Why did a bulter even.... So then muttered, "Why do you even *know* all this?"

Francois turned their head—just barely—and offered a serene smile.

"A butler," they said simply, "Must be prepared to serve in many fields."

Ryusui, still leaning back in his chair, gave a single satisfied nod.

"Damn right."

And she was still dying. Okoye lay motionless in the cot, skin like wax paper, eyes barely opening between fits of fevered sleep. Her breathing was uneven. Pulse fragile. Blood pressure skating low despite every damn fluid intervention. *None of*

it was enough. Senku kept moving. He couldn't stop. Not now. Not when she was still fighting. He replaced the IV line. He reset the timer.

"Hang in there, Doctor," He muttered under his breath, voice raw. "I didn't fly halfway across the world just to watch you go out like this."

Okoye stirred.

Her voice was barely audible. "Still… bossing me around…"

Yuzuriha was crying quietly, hands curled in her lap, head bowed low. She didn't sniffle or sob, but the tears were there, falling steady, catching the light.

Taiju sat next to her, blinking hard, his fists clenched on his knees. He opened his mouth —just a little—like he was going to say something.

"At least she's still talking," he almost whispered. "At least she has energy to—"

But the words died before they made it out.

Because he remembered.

He clamped his mouth shut and reached up to swipe at his face, but it was too late—his cheeks were wet. The tears came anyway. Silent, heavy. He ducked his head, shoulders curling forward, trying not to let it show.

Senku stopped.

Then huffed softly through his mask. "Of course I am."

Her lips twitched, almost a smile. Then she coughed, and the sound was… wrong. Wet. Rattling. Deep.

Senku's hands shook.

In a flash, she wasn't in the ship anymore. She was ten years old, crouched beside her sister's futon, watching Ruri press a bloodstained cloth to her mouth, pretending it was nothing. Pretending it didn't hurt. Pretending she wasn't fading right in front of her. The same sound. The same sickly wetness. That deep, scraping breath that meant it had already gone too far. Kohaku's jaw clenched. Her hand curled tightly around the edge of her chair.

She forced herself back to the present, eyes fixed on the screen—but she was rigid now, every muscle locked in place like it might keep her from remembering too much. From *feeling* too much.

And still the image played on, unrelenting.

Senku kept going, steady hands over trembling ones.

And Kohaku silently pressed her nails into her palm until she felt it. Something she could control. Something solid.

He steadied them.

Rechecked everything.

You're not here to make coffee or play intern.

He kept hearing it. Over and over. The challenge she'd given him, the spark behind her eyes when she said it. And now she was fading. He hated this. Science was supposed to work. Cause and effect. Treatment and result. But viruses didn't give a damn how smart you were. How many papers you'd read. How many variables you controlled. Some things were just brutal.

Unfair.

Human.

Rajiv stood outside the tent, waiting, but he didn't ask. He already knew. They all knew, even as they tried to help her fight it. Luis hadn't left the post all night. Senku stepped outside for ten minutes. Ten minutes to breathe.

Then went back in.

Outside the playback, Gen sat very still, his eyes narrowed in thought—not at the screen, but at what was happening *around* the screen.

Why isn't Rajiv in there? The question sparked automatically. *Why let a sixteen-year-old run that entire tent alone? Why—*

But even as he thought it, he figured out the answer. Because Ada was down. And with her gone, *Rajiv* was the lead researcher. He was the one coordinating external aid. Probably spent every second fighting logistics, trying to get more support into a dying zone. The med bus was days away. Luis was on equipment and ground handling. Senku—Senku had *chosen* the worst job and hadn't stopped. They were all burning the candle down to vapor.

Gen's gaze drifted to the current Senku beside him.

Still as stone, as though he were petrified again.

Eyes forward, locked on the screen.

Expression unreadable—but *wrong*. Too flat. Too silent.

Not calculated silence. Not focused silence.

Blank.

Gen didn't speak. He just shifted slightly where he sat. And pressed their ankles together—lightly.

Not attention-drawing. Not obvious.

Just contact.

Senku didn’t react. But after a few seconds, his shoulders shifted—barely. His jaw tensed. And Gen thought maybe—just maybe—that had helped.

Another Night Passes
3:12 A.M.

He knew.

The second he saw her hands still. The rise and fall of her chest had stopped. No alarm sounded. No dramatic final moment. Just stillness. Senku stood there, silent. The air was too quiet. He didn’t move for a full minute. He just stared. His brain cataloged everything. Every line. Every failed treatment. Every measurement. Every moment. As if facts could shield him from what was in front of him.

Then he turned and reached for the clipboard.

He recorded the time of death.

Signed the line with a hand that trembled, he wasn't supposed to do this part, she was the one who recorded these things, but she wasn't here anymore. Help, true medical help, was too far away for them to get to her in time. His hands wouldn't stop their shaking movements.

No one in the playback room breathed.

The screen didn’t fade. It just held on Senku’s profile as he stood at the edge of the cot, motionless, the clipboard slipping from his fingers like it weighed too much. Like everything did.

Yuzuriha let out a soft sound—barely a gasp—and covered her mouth with both hands. Tears streamed silently down her cheeks. She didn’t blink. She couldn’t.

Taiju was already crying. He tried—really, he did—but the moment Senku's hand started shaking on screen, the dam broke. He had never really seen Senku like that. It hurt to see his friend in pain like that. His chest hitched. His face crumpled. "She was so kind," he whispered. "She was so smart and she… she didn't even get a chance."

Chrome had his hand over his mouth, staring like he'd just seen a law of nature snap in half. It reminded him of trying and trying for Ruri, but at least Senku had some idea of what could actually help. His eyes burned with unshed tears, his voice quiet and rough. "He did everything. He *did everything.*"

Kohaku stared hard at the screen, fists clenched, her jaw locked. Her throat worked as she swallowed, blinking rapidly—no tears fell, but she looked like she was standing on a cliff edge. Like if she breathed wrong, she might lose her footing.

Ukyo sat very still. Eyes half-lidded. Focused. Not immune. Just processing in the quiet way he always did—shoulders rising and falling in a single deep breath.

Francois didn't make a sound. But a single tear slid cleanly down their cheek, and they didn't move to wipe it away.

Gen didn't cry. He didn't even blink for a long moment. Because the second Senku's younger self began to shake—*just subtly*, just that tremble in the hand—Gen turned his gaze not to the screen but to the man beside him.

Senku.

The one sitting so still, so quiet, his arms folded so tightly across his chest it looked almost painful. His shoulders were stiff, like he was holding himself in place out of sheer mental inertia. Like if he shifted even slightly, the pieces might come undone. He watched him with the precision of someone who had studied every flicker of this man's behavior. The way Senku's breathing slowed—not to relax, but to *control*. The faint clench of his jaw. The tension behind his eyes.

He's not okay, Gen thought.

He’s surviving it.

But he’s not okay.

And there was *nothing* Gen could say—not right now—that wouldn’t crack open a wound that Senku wasn’t ready to name.

So he didn’t speak.

Didn’t shift.

He just *watched*. Ready. Grounded. Waiting. Because if Senku needed a hand to reach out—or a shield to fall behind—Gen would be that. Quietly. Without asking. Words were too sharp when grief was this close to the surface. But that didn’t mean Gen would leave him alone in it.

So he shifted his ankle—just barely—and pressed it a little more firmly against Senku’s.

I’m here.

Research Station – Morning

The sun rose too quietly.

Ugandan heat clung to the buildings, indifferent to the fact that something *world-changing* had just happened inside their little compound. Something personal. Unscientific. *Human.* Senku walked out of the tent with slow, deliberate steps. Not staggering. Not crumbling. Just… measured. He pulled off his gloves last. Luis was already leaning against the rusted truck, arms crossed tight, jaw clenched. Rajiv sat on the steps of the admin building, half-drained water bottle in one hand, his eyes red but dry.

No one said anything at first.

Senku didn’t either. He just sank down beside Rajiv, his arms resting loosely over his knees. The stiffness in his limbs was from more than just the all-nighter.

Rajiv broke the silence.

“She didn’t even scream,” He whispered, "So many of them do."

Senku didn’t look at him. “She wouldn’t.”

Kohaku sat rigid, eyes narrowed but glassy, her arms braced against her knees. “Senku…” She stopped, jaw tightening. *He didn’t even… he didn’t cry. I don't understand him sometimes.*

“He bears a lot silently.,” Ukyo said softly. Not judgmental—just matter-of-fact.

Francois, hands clasped gently, spoke without inflection. “It is a rare soul who faces their own death with such clarity. She chose control in the end. Perhaps to spare them. Perhaps to anchor herself. But even then, it was strength.”

No one disagreed.

The current Senku still hadn’t moved. Gen leaned ever so slightly closer—close enough to catch the tiny tension at the corner of Senku’s eye. The way he was *holding himself*.

He wanted to reach for him.

He didn’t.

“Stubborn to the end,” Luis said, voice low. “Didn’t want anyone else to waste time grieving her.”

That landed like a rock in Senku’s chest.

That’s exactly what she would’ve said.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. His vision felt narrowed, like he was looking out from glasses made with pins, vision tunneled. His voice was quick, clipped—already slipping into the rhythm of fact over feeling. “I logged everything. Full vitals. Response timelines. I have four hours of bloodwork data we can use for case comparison. I tracked her leukocyte response across all stages. Recorded every antipyretic administration, even the doses she refused. We can build out the thermal curve models, see how the viral load adapted post-treatment. And I think—if we match the hepatic markers against the last strain—”

Chrome blinked hard, swallowing visibly. Almost disgruntled, “He’s not—he’s not even talking about her like a person anymore.”

“I guesss... He can’t,” Ukyo said softly, explaining as his gaze fixed on the current Senku. “He’s trying to process it the only way he knows how. Everyone processes grief different.”

And Francois, calmly, evenly: “This is what it looks like for Senku-sama when grief exceeds the limits of personal coping, frankly ever since he saw so many of the people dying he was likely already emotionally exhausted. This is likely the last straw. He’s preserving functionality by converting pain into data.”

Gen didn’t take his eyes off Senku.

Senku’s mind was *roaring*.

He couldn’t stop seeing it.

Not just the recording—but the *real thing*.

The weight of the clipboard. The ink smudge on the corner of the time-of-death sheet. The *exact* moment her pulse dropped. The damp heat of the tent. The way her voice sounded in the last ten minutes—rough, quiet, but steady. How she *refused* pain meds unless he snuck them in through other measures. How she still corrected his posture

while dying. His brain didn't blur anything. Didn't soften the edges like normal people's did.

It remembered *everything*. Perfect detail. Perfect color. Perfect sound. Every second of it, recorded and tagged in synaptic space.

Always vivid.

He couldn't unsee it. Couldn't *not* relive it.

He wanted to focus on anything else—anything.

He tried.

Focused on the pressure of the seat beneath him. The soft, persistent warmth against his ankle.

Gen.

Still pressed against him.

Still *there*.

A point of contact anchoring him to the present.

To something *real.*

Senku swallowed hard. Faded back the present. He heard Yuzuriha's quiet, broken sob. And Taiju's choked breath. And it kept him here. Kept him from spiraling into memory again. Kept him grounded enough to *breathe.*

"Senku."

Rajiv's voice was soft.

"You don't have to do this."

Senku looked at him sharply.

"You don't have to *science* your way out of this one," Rajiv said. "It's okay to just… Be sad, you know."

Senku's voice was dull, "That's inefficient."

"Kid..."

Luis exhaled, the sound half a chuckle. "Christ. You sound just like her."

Senku flinched. Just a twitch. Barely visible.

And before anyone could stop him, Taiju was *up*. He crossed the room in three long strides and dropped to his knees in front of Senku, arms already moving before Senku could process what was happening.

"Tai—" was all Senku got out before he was engulfed.

Completely smothered.

"Sorry, Senku!" Taiju cried, hugging him tight, his voice shaking now too. "But this is happening! We're not just gonna sit here while you keep breaking and pretending you're not! That's not what friends do!"

Senku stiffened instantly, hands trapped awkwardly between them, jaw clenched like he was *debating a full reboot of his existence*. But Taiju didn't let go. He just held on tighter, warm and solid and *unshakably present*.

Yuzuriha knelt beside them, her hand landing gently on Senku's shoulder. "You don't have to say anything," She said softly. "You don't even have to react. Just… let us be here. Please."

Senku sat frozen for several long seconds.

Too many seconds.

But he didn't push them away.

Gen—still in his seat—watched the tiniest shift in Senku's shoulders. Not a sob. Not a sigh. Just a subtle collapse inward. Like the pressure of holding it all had finally eased by one degree. Gen let out a quiet breath and folded his arms, letting the ankle contact go now that Senku had *more*.

More hands. More warmth. More *people*.

But Rajiv caught it.

Senku's eyes were sharp, dry, and impossibly tired. "She was the best scientist I ever met."

"Yeah," Rajiv agreed. "She was."

Silence stretched again. The weight of the air changed. Then Luis stepped forward and dropped something between them. A folded note. Worn. Ink smudged at the corners.

"She gave me this the night she started showing symptoms. Didn't know why, she just said to give it to you in a few days."

Senku hesitated before reaching for it.

Taiju sniffled, wiping his eyes again with the sleeve of his hoodie. He'd ended up right beside Senku—practically glued to him at this point, shoulder to shoulder, crowding him

into Gen's personal space. It was irritating. Claustrophobic. But… grounding. It kept Senku from slipping too far into the past, so he let it slide. For now. Taiju's voice cracked, still too loud in a room where everything felt like it should be quiet. "What did she write…? You think she knew exactly what he'd need to hear?"

Gen didn't answer right away. When he did, his tone was quieter, sharp and precise like a scalpel. Focused. Senku liked that better. Taiju's emotional wreckage might've cut through the fog, but Gen's words kept him tethered.

"She knew how Senku's grief works," Gen murmured. "It doesn't hit him in the moment. Not when there's work to do. It waits. Slips in after the chaos is over. That's when the spiral starts—rationalization, guilt, obsessive analysis. So she left him something personal. Something emotional. To disrupt the cycle. To make sure he'd actually feel it."

Senku's throat tightened.

Yeah. That was Ada. Always two steps ahead, even when it hurt. He didn't want to think about that era—it burned too sharp in the corners of his memory—but hearing Gen parse it like that somehow made it bearable. It meant she'd understood. That she'd known him well enough to prepare for the breakdown she never got to see. He could feel Gen's gaze on him, soft and steady. Taiju, meanwhile, had full-on collapsed against his side, sobbing louder than Senku had cried the entire playback. Big, ridiculous idiot. Yuzuriha being soft at his shoulder, her touch reassuring.

His throat ached.

But he stayed still.

The handwriting was unmistakable. Jagged. Efficient. Fast.

But the ink dragged slightly in places—moments where her hand must've shaken.

Senku—

You're a brat. Arrogant. Smarter than everyone in the room and never let them forget it. You never shut up about whatever insane experiment you're running, and you question every authority like it's a reflex.

Good.

That's what this world needs.

I don't have time to leave you some long, poetic goodbye. I don't even want to—not when you're still standing. Still breathing. Don't waste time mourning me, Senku. If you do, I swear I'll come back and haunt your lab and mislabel every sample. You've got work to do. This world's gonna get a lot worse before it gets better. You'll lose people. You'll lose things you didn't even know you needed. But you'll survive it. Because you're not just smart. You're relentless.

So don't stop. Don't break. And don't shut that brilliant, ridiculous brain of yours down because someone you cared about didn't make it.

Keep moving forward. Keep building. Keep fighting.

I'm proud of you, kid. You were the right choice.
—Ada

Senku's breath caught.

The lab was silent.

No beeping monitors. No spinning centrifuge. No sarcastic remark waiting from across the room.

Just that scrap of paper and his fingers clenched too tight around it. The edges dug into his palm. He didn't loosen his grip. He didn't cry. But it felt like something inside him had just gone *very* still. He folded the note precisely, carefully—like it was made of glass—and slipped it into his notebook without a word.

"She believed in him. That much. Even while she was dying." Kohaku exhaled slowly, her shoulders tense. "That kind of strength… it's not fair. It shouldn't *have* to be this way."

Taiju rubbed his eyes again, voice hoarse. "She didn't even say goodbye."

“She didn’t need to,” Francois said gently. “She knew he wouldn’t be able to accept it if she did. What she gave him instead was purpose.”

Taiju was again crying at Senku's side, Francois reigniting his upset. Yuzuriha tightened her fingers at Senku's shoulders just a little bit.

They held a small service. Private. Simple. No grand speeches—just quiet words and real grief. The kind that didn’t need volume to feel *loud* inside. Rajiv placed a folded lab coat beside her sealed gear—meticulously laundered, sleeves tucked in. His fingers lingered for a second longer than necessary before he pulled back. Luis poured out the first shot of Senku’s moonshine into the grass. The firelight caught the liquid mid-fall, making it gleam. Apparently, she didn't have any family, and her instructions on death were to keep her were she worked, let her return to the ecosystem. A scientist to the end.

“Hell of a vintage, Doc,” he said, his voice low, hoarse at the edges.

No one spoke after that.

Not until the others had gone.

Senku stayed behind.

“She didn’t have any family,” Taiju said quietly. “But they were her family. Right? Rajiv. Luis. Senku.”

The word hit like a steel bolt. Senku didn’t react at first. Not outwardly. But Gen felt it—the subtle catch in his breathing. The small, deliberate pause where Senku *should’ve* shifted away and didn’t. Yuzuriha’s hand was still resting gently on his shoulder. Taiju’s arms hadn’t fully let go yet—still half-looped behind him like a protective brace, keeping Senku *in* the group whether he liked it or not.

Senku?

He swallowed hard.

Just once.

Sharp. Audible. Painful.

The sound of someone pulling grief back down before it cracked something loose. He stared straight ahead, jaw tight, not trusting himself to speak. His arms were still folded across his chest like he could keep everything from spilling out if he just held on hard enough.

And Gen saw it. *Felt* it.

He didn't say a word. He wished he could help more.

But he pressed their ankles together again—gently, quietly.

> He wasn't sure *why.* It wasn't like he believed in spirits. But he knelt. Slowly. The ground felt brittle under his knees. His hand raised—index and middle fingers pressed tight together—brought up just beside his temple. The motion was slow. Deliberate. Familiar. Two fingers. Just like hers. He'd seen her do it a hundred times to focus. To *cut out the noise.* He held the pose, eyes trained forward but unfocused. No graphs. No countdowns. No bubbling beakers or spinning centrifuges.
>
> Just the stillness of the field. The shape of her laugh buried in the back of his memory.
>
> And the unbearable silence of genius left behind.
>
> *What the hell am I supposed to do now…?*

Kohaku turned to look at him, her brows knit. "It's crazy, isn't it? He went through all of that… and then he woke up here, in this world—and built everything from scratch. How did he carry all that and still *do* this?"

Gen's expression softened, a crease forming at the edge of his brow. “Think of it like how you always fetched water for your sister,” he said quietly. “To you, it wasn’t a burden. It was instinct. Because you loved her, right?” He glanced toward the screen. “For Senku, building civilization again… it’s like that. It’s how he honors what he lost. What he survived.”

The silence that followed felt heavier than anything the room had held all day—thick with understanding, unspoken but sharp.

Chrome broke it, his voice quiet. “There’ve been times I felt like everything was falling apart. Like I couldn’t deal with it. But if I found something new—some weird metal, some strange fungus—I’d focus on it. Let it take over until everything else got smaller.” He rubbed his thumb over his palm. “It’s not the same. But I get it, a little. I think that’s what Senku does too.”

The question wasn’t scientific.

Which made it worse.

Senku’s brain tried to calculate the odds—what had gone wrong, what could’ve been done differently—but the numbers wouldn’t line up. He could recite her temperature chart. Her white blood cell drop-off. Her oxygenation decline. But that didn’t give him an answer. Didn’t *change* anything. He didn’t cry. He wasn’t sure if that was because he couldn’t… or because he didn’t know how. All he could do was hold that pose. Two fingers up. Like hers. Until the sun slipped farther behind the horizon and the cold began to creep up through his knees. Eventually—when the weight in his chest stopped feeling like a full-body static—he stood. He didn’t brush off the dust. Didn’t say goodbye. Just turned and walked back toward camp, shoulders straighter than they should’ve been for someone carrying that much loss.

And then—he started talking. Low. Rushed. Like the thoughts were leaking out before he could stop them, “If I’d bypassed the standard drip and used sodium-lactate base, maybe the clotting factor would’ve stabilized sooner—”

Gen’s head snapped toward him. “Senku—?”

“No—wait, no, her platelet count was already dropping. But if I’d swapped the delivery order—antivirals *before* cooling, or no, maybe intubation sooner—should’ve forced O_2 saturation back up—”

His words came faster. Sharper. Less like analysis, more like compulsion.

“If I’d synthesized a new polymer bag I could’ve chilled the IV line from the outside—used the reflective tarp from the truck—why didn’t I think of that, why didn’t I *think*—”

Chrome’s stomach turned. “He’s spiraling…”

Kohaku’s hand went to her mouth, eyes wide.

Senku tugged sharply at his hair—fist clenched in it, not hard enough to tear, but *close*. As if scared, Taiju and Yuzuriha both took a step back , never having seen Senku like this, Yuzuriha covering her mouth in a soft sort of horror as Senku word vomited his regrets. They went back to whree they were sitting before as Gen waved them away. They followed his instruction without a word, knowing better than to go against Gen when it came to something like this.

“She *told* me she felt off that day. I didn’t push her. I thought—she always bounces back. Always. But if I’d just—*if I’d just*—”

“Senku,” Gen said, more firmly now, “Breathe.”

But Senku wasn’t listening.

“The electrolyte balance—too unstable—if I’d made her drink the goddamn rehydration mix earlier, same day even—if I’d lied, said it was flavored, said anything—”

His voice cracked, but kept going.

Like his brain couldn't stop running simulations even now. Especially now.

"Too many variables. No control group. Data all corrupted. But if I just—if I run it again —"

"Senku."

Still nothing.

Not until—

"There wasn't a perfect fix," He whispered. "Not back then. Not now. Nothing I did changed it."

And just like that, the flood of words stopped. He stared upward, fingers still tangled in his hair, jaw clenched like it was holding in the scream he couldn't afford to make.

And then—quiet. Flat. Numb.

"That's the part that kills me," he muttered. "Science didn't fail. It just wasn't enough. Not for her."

Taiju had tears in his eyes again.

Yuzuriha looked like she couldn't breathe.

Senku’s voice was barely audible now, but they heard it.

Because it was compulsive. Damaged. Honest.

“But it *will* be. Next time. That’s the point. We advance. We make it better.”

His eyes were far away.

“So the next person has a chance. No more Ada's. No more…”

He swallowed hard.

No more failures.

Gen didn’t say a word. He just reached out—slow and sure—and set his hand gently on Senku’s arm. Not to stop him. Just to remind him he wasn’t alone. Senku didn’t flinch at Gen’s touch. And slowly—*slowly*—his death-grip on his hair loosened. He stared down at his knees for a long moment, breath shallow. Then:

“There’s a way out of this,” He murmured, “I mean… eventually. "If we figure out how the petrification tech works, and if we can replicate it on a *controlled scale*... It wouldn’t have to be all or nothing,” he said, more to himself than anyone else. “We could… stop the body at the first sign of collapse. Pause it. Lock the cell decay. Then *restart, and they would be healed*. Even if we couldn't replicate the healing factor, we could still freeze them... And unpetrify them once equipment gets there. Once help arrives.”

He dragged his hands down his face and let out a slow, shuddering breath.

Kohaku blinked, stunned. “You think that’s actually possible?”

“I don’t know, the whole thing would need a lot of testing,” Senku admitted, raw and quiet. “But if it is… Ada would’ve lived.”

The room fell silent again—*different* this time. Not hollow. Not crushed.

Something heavier. More solemn.

Purposeful.

“And if we build it,” He continued, staring into the middle distance now, “We could stop the next one. Maybe all of them. Death wouldn’t have to be… immediate. Final. We’d get time.”

His mouth twitched into something that was not a smile, but wasn’t despair either.

Francois was the one to finally break the silence.

“A single controlled-use stasis device would change the entire field of emergency care.”

“Exactly,” Senku said, voice steadier now. “We couldn’t save her. But this… this could save *thousands, millions*.”

And just like that—*in the middle of grief*—he was already building the future.

The inbox notification blinked red on the shared desktop. Rajiv clicked it open. Luis leaned over his shoulder to skim the subject line. His jaw tightened before he even read the body. Senku didn’t move from the far side of the lab, where he was cleaning the microscope lenses for no reason other than the need to *do* something. He didn’t look up, didn’t speak.

The email was short.

Clinical. Sanitized.

To all participating field researchers and staff,

Thank you for your dedication and contribution to the Zaire Field Study (Group Code ZFS-1242) over the past several months. We recognize your service under difficult conditions and your commitment to public health during crisis conditions. Due to recent events and in compliance with WHO operational protocols, the current research program will be suspended indefinitely, effective immediately. All remaining data is to be transferred to the central archive link provided below.

Researchers who submitted publications will be issued a residual credit package, detailed in the attached form. This includes shared authorship rights where applicable.

Please begin closing site operations and prepare for full withdrawal within 72 hours.

Again, thank you for your service.

— The International Virology Collaborative Board

Rajiv's hands dropped from the keyboard. "...That's it?"

Luis let out a low breath, dragging a hand down his face. "That's *always* it."

Senku didn't say anything.

Yuzuriha's hands curled into fists in her lap. "That's how they say it?" she whispered. "After everything?"

Kohaku's face twisted in disbelief. "She died there. They watched people die—and that's the response?"

Ukyo's jaw was tight, his voice sharp. "It's easier to bury data than take responsibility." He paused, shoulders tense. "It's not that different from the letters they send to the families of soldiers. I've seen them. Folded, impersonal, barely more than a template. No name unless you check the envelope. Just a stock phrase and a signature. Doesn't matter if you served three months or thirty years—it all reads the same."

His gaze stayed locked on the screen. “It’s designed that way. Stripped of individuality. So the people in charge don’t have to feel anything.”

Taiju’s voice cracked. “They didn’t even say her name…”

Francois’s eyes narrowed, their tone still calm but laced with ice. “A letter like that is not just heartless. It’s deliberate. The detachment is calculated—to avoid legal and emotional liability. Nothing more.”

He just kept cleaning the lens. Circular motion. Careful, methodical strokes.

Rajiv turned slightly toward him. “Hey. You okay?”

Senku’s voice was flat. “We’re being sent home. That’s the part that matters. Or, for you guys, maybe relocated.”

“But we’re not done.”

Senku’s hands stilled. His eyes lifted to the whiteboard where Okoye’s last notes were still visible in smeared marker.

“Neither was she,” he said.

Luis looked over at them, voice bitter. “They didn’t even say her name.”

“Doesn’t fit the email format,” Senku muttered, brittle, dull.

He stood up, tossing the cloth aside. “I’ll start packing up the hard drives.”

Yuzuriha’s eyes filled instantly. She covered her mouth again, trying not to sob.

Taiju shook his head slowly, voice barely audible. “That’s not right… That’s *so* not right…”

Kohaku blinked hard. “She mattered *so much.* And now… they’re treating her like a file. I don't get it, we would never do that in the village. Modern people... I sometimes don't understand you at all."

Gen whispered, just loud enough to be heard by the people closest: “That’s the worst kind of grief. When the world moves on like it never happened—and you’re left with *everything.*”

Rajiv looked down at the screen, then back at his youngest team member. “You’re not gonna fight it? They might cut her name from publications for this, they do that.”

Senku paused. Just for a second. *Why ask him,* he illogically thought a bit of anger making way to his thoughts, *but that was fine, because he had already solved the problem, so Rajiv wasn't wrong to ask.*

Then: “No.”

“Why?”

Senku glanced at the whiteboard one last time. “Because I already saved the data last night under her name in public forum.”

Rajiv blinked.

Luis cracked a dry, humorless smile. “You sneaky little bastard.”

Senku just shrugged, already moving. “I didn’t trust them to handle it with care.”

Chrome let out a breathless wheeze. “Let’s *goooooooo*.”

Taiju, still sniffling, sat up straighter. “That’s our Senku!”

Even Ukyo smiled faintly. “Preemptive data strike. Very you.”

Yuzuriha actually laughed—wet and soft, but genuine. “He made sure she’d never be erased. Not on his watch.”

It was a shame the petrification had happened—because all that careful work Senku did to preserve Ada’s memory, to make sure she was credited and never forgotten, had been lost with it. That was what made this strange, beautiful watch party so important. Now,

they could remember her. Not just Senku. Not just one young scientist carrying it all on his shoulders. She'd be remembered as the fierce, brilliant woman she was, a true role model. It was painful. But it was beautiful too, Yuzuriha had to admit.

Gen shook his head, a grin tugging at his lips. "Impressive as always, Senku-chan. Makes one wonder why you even *need* a mentalist."

Francois gave a quiet nod of approval. "A dignified act of rebellion. Fitting, and utterly in character."

Senku gave the faintest twitch of a smile.

> The dorms were already half-empty. NGO vehicles had come and gone all day, collecting crates of supplies and shutting off systems one by one. Rajiv sat on the floor beside his bed, surrounded by an open duffel. He'd packed and repacked it three times now. Luis was chain-smoking outside in the heat, boots propped against a water barrel. Senku had finished in half the time. His things were precise, compartmentalized, ready.
>
> But he hadn't gone to sleep.
>
> Instead, he sat at the table with a black pen in one hand and the last bottle of his homemade alcohol on the counter beside him—sealed, unbroken, meant for her.
>
> His eyes burned, but he didn't cry.
>
> He wouldn't.
>
> He *couldn't*.
>
> Not yet.

Gen felt his jaw tighten. He could *feel* the compression—the kind of emotional lockdown that started in the chest and sank deep into the bones. And he knew the data. The patterns. The psychology. He'd written entire lectures on the cost of restraint. On how tears release stress hormones. How suppression raises cortisol, ruins sleep, wears down the immune system. How unspoken grief doesn't vanish—it just *settles*. Into posture. Into breath. Into the body.

He swallowed hard.

“I hate this part,” He muttered, barely audible.

Chrome glanced over. “What?”

Gen didn’t look away from the screen. “This moment. When they don’t cry.”

Kohaku tilted her head, brow furrowing. “But… some people don’t. Isn’t that just how they grieve?”

Gen’s fingers curled tightly against his knee. “He keeps moving. Keeps thinking. Keeps fixing. It *looks* like strength. But it’s just damage with good time management.”

It was the past, he reminded himself. That Senku—the one locked behind the screen—wasn’t alone forever. He’d made it through. This version sitting beside him now had cried. Had healed. Probably. Still… watching it, Gen itched to reach through the glass and do something. *Say* something. Even just list the science behind tears, cite some obscure biochemical study about grief responses. That might’ve actually worked, back then.

It would’ve been so *Senku*—to cry only when the data convinced him it was chemically necessary.

Gen bit back a breath.

The email still sat open on his laptop, untouched.

He closed the lid.

Then, in slow, sharp letters, he started writing: *Case Notes: Okoye, Ada. Virologist. Primary mentor. Deceased.*

> Senku stood outside the terminal in the shadow of a concrete pillar, satellite phone tucked between his shoulder and ear. The heat hadn't let up all week, but he barely noticed it anymore. The line clicked once. Then—
>
> "Senku?"
>
> Byakuya's voice came through with such warmth and immediate relief that Senku felt his throat tighten more than he expected.

Yuzuriha's hand flew to her chest, eyes wide with relief. "Thank god."

Taiju let out a shaky breath like he'd been holding it for ten minutes. "Oh man, yes. If anyone can help him…"

Even Kohaku, still visibly tense, allowed her expression to soften. "It's the first time Senku's face even twitched since she died."

On the floor, present-day Senku inhaled shallowly as Byakuya's voice filled the room again. *Knowing the context this time made it worse.* It was—objectively—a shameless assault on his mental state. He didn't know who or what was deciding the order of these memories, but whoever had designed this playback… they were cruel. And it took a *lot* for him to think something like that. His heart was pounding, frantic and uneven, like his body had thrown itself into fight-or-flight mode without consulting the brain first.

Senku clenched his jaw and tried to regulate his breathing. Just a simple biochemical response.

Simple.

Right.

"I'm coming home," he said.

A beat.

"…What happened?" Byakuya asked softly.

Senku didn't answer at first. He watched a plane sweep across the morning sky.

"The project's over," he said finally. "Our lead researcher died. It was a Zaire strain. It got in fast."

There was a long silence on the line. Byakuya didn't push.

"I'm proud of you," he said instead. "You stayed. You fought. You did what you could."

Chrome blinked hard. "That's… man. Byakuya really was amazing."

Yuzuriha smiled through the tear tracks still drying on her cheeks. "He definitely knew exactly what Senku needed to hear…"

Taiju sniffled. "That's what a real dad sounds like."

Kohaku stared down at her hands. "No wonder Senku turned out the way he did."

Senku's eyes never left the screen.

But Gen saw it—the way his hand curled into a fist in his lap, the subtle tension in his jaw. So Gen leaned in, just slightly, his presence deliberate. Not touching. Just there. Just enough to keep the silence from turning into loneliness. Because if Byakuya couldn't say it anymore, someone had to. Someone had to make sure Senku didn't forget that he was *enough*. That he was *more* than enough. Brilliant in ways that defied numbers and logic and the rules Senku pretended to care about more than people. With him—Gen—and with Yuzuriha, and Taiju, and the rest of the Kingdom of Science… maybe they could balance that cold space in his heart. Not replace it.

Senku closed his eyes, the words threading through that deep exhaustion he hadn't acknowledged until now.

"I archived all the data. We saved what mattered."

"I'll have your room ready," Byakuya said. "You want me to pick you up?"

Senku shook his head, forgetting he was on the phone. "I'll take the shuttle. I'll be back tomorrow."

"…Okay. I'll make something with beans."

Senku huffed softly through his nose. "Naturally."

They didn't say goodbye—just hung up.

Then Gen *immediately* leaned back, lips curling into a smirk. Took this moment to attempt and return as much energy as he could while the moment lasted, because he had a feeling that they weren't quite done with the depressive stuff quite yet, "*Ah, the return of the beans.* And not just any beans—space beans. Trauma beans. Apocalypse legumes."

Chrome cracked up. "We *knew* it! I *knew* he was gonna bring them up again!"

Yuzuriha giggled, wiping her face with the edge of her sleeve. "Wait, is that like, his love language or something?"

"Oh, fully," Gen said. "Senku told me once the man made bean *pancakes.*"

"*Bean pancakes?*" Kohaku blinked. "That's… upsetting."

That... Was absolute bullshit and not something that ever happened or that he had ever told the Mentalist. He saw what Gen was trying to do though, and honestly? It was a very Byakuya thing to do. Senku muttered, eyes still on the screen but voice dry. "It was *deeply* upsetting."

And when Gen's ankle nudged gently against his again beneath the bench, Senku didn't pull away. He did glance over at Gen out of the corner of his eyes and saw that he was shooting him that same smirk they used when they ere planning Hell together again, and Senku felt something loosen in his chest.

Taiju blinked. "Wait, so… *why* beans, though?"

Senku rolled his eyes—slow, dramatic, almost fond. "Because he was waiting for me to *snap* and finally ask for pizza."

Gen *lost it.* He really wished he had the chance to have met Byakuya, he was an interesting person that was for sure, "That was *the plan?* Oh my god—he was running a full psychological experiment!"

"Yep," Senku said flatly. "He made curry beans. Bean wraps. Bean jelly."

Francois raised a single, elegant eyebrow. "Ah. The long game of culinary attrition."

"Exactly," Senku muttered. "And I *never* caved."

Ukyo chuckled. "Of course you didn't."

Chrome grinned. "That's the most stubborn thing I've ever heard."

Rajiv leaned against a pillar, backpack slung over one shoulder and a faded UNICEF patch on the strap. He looked tired in a way that wasn't physical. Luis stood nearby with a single duffel and his arms crossed, tapping a cigarette against his palm even though the no-smoking signs were everywhere.

"Got your boarding pass?" Rajiv asked.

Senku nodded, handing it over so Rajiv could double-check it, because he knew the man needed *something* to fuss over.

“Alright. I’ve confirmed the data transfer to Geneva and Nairobi. I also sent your archive package to the WHO fallback address—twice. You know. In case they ‘misplace’ it.”

Senku gave a half-smile. “Thanks.”

Luis didn’t say anything right away. Then he stepped forward and extended a hand.

Senku raised an eyebrow, but shook it.

Luis’s grip was solid. “You’re a hell of a scientist. You get that, right?”

Taiju beamed. “They’re treating him like an *equal!* Like he’s not just some genius kid, but an *actual peer!* Not that I'm surprised, this is Senku we are talking about!"

Francois gave a quiet smile. “It is rare for men who have fought through crises to offer that kind of handshake to someone so young. Even rarer when they mean it.”

Yuzuriha’s eyes shimmered a little again, but this time with pride. “He *deserved* to hear that. He needed to. I'm so happy, Senku really deserved that type of recognition after everything.”

Gen smiled faintly, a little bittersweet. “You know,” He murmured, “I think part of him was waiting his whole life to hear that from someone outside his dad.”

Gen paused, his expression turning thoughtful. Was he projecting this? Senku had more friends young than he had he probably had heard genuine compliments like this before from people other than his father. A quick look at Senku rather confirmed it though, the man didn't seem to disagree with the statement

Senku shrugged. “It’s just brain chemistry and applied problem solving.”

Luis actually snorted. “And zero social skills.”

Rajiv rolled his eyes. “Hey—don’t bully the genius.”

He pulled Senku into a brief, impulsive hug. Senku tolerated it, stiff as a board, but didn’t pull away.

“Take care of yourself,” Rajiv said, quieter now. “Promise? Keep in contact.”

Senku didn’t answer that directly. He stepped back, adjusted the strap of his carry-on, and nodded once.

“Thank you,” he said instead.

Then he turned toward the terminal doors without looking back.

His head tilted just a fraction, eyes narrowing in quiet calculation. He *had* noticed it before. Senku didn’t like being touched—not casually. Even just earlier when Taiju and Yuzuriha had come over he hadn't seemed comfortable. It seemed that touch wasn't welcomed. Not by most people. He’d practically *grappled* Taiju off of him once, and even Yuzuriha got the occasional side-step.

But this?

No resistance.

Not even a muttered protest.

Interesting.

Gen’s mind buzzed. *So maybe it’s not a full aversion. Maybe it’s… selective tolerance?* He ran a mental checklist.

—He hadn’t moved away when Gen pressed their ankles together.
—He hadn’t pulled away when Gen took his pulse that one time during the nitric gas headache experiment.
—And *recently*, he’d even leaned into proximity during their late-night science binge. Voluntarily.

Hm.

Very interesting.

Gen crossed one leg over the other, balancing it on the leg that was still touching Senku, fingers steepled lightly under his chin. *Is it contextual? Is it about familiarity? Is it about control?* His brain was already drawing up a chart. *Duration. Origin of touch. Environment. Physical vs. Emotional intent.*

And then his thoughts *slid sideways.*

...Testing those limits might require repeated exposure.

Repeated contact.

Controlled environments.

Variables.

His brain went *quietly feral* for half a second.

A slow, slow blink.

Absolutely not the time for that mental image. He cleared his throat lightly, blinking back to the present. *Focus, Gen. Focus. You're doing science. Not having a psychological crisis about the accidental hotness of your crush's stoic touch tolerance.*

Narita International Airport, Tokyo – Early Morning

The air was too clean.

Senku knew that should be a good thing, but it wasn't. It lacked texture. No red dust in his throat. No acrid smoke from makeshift charcoal stoves. No chemical tang from sterilizing fluid or heat-warped plastic.

Just filtered, chilled, lifeless air.

The terminal was polished to a mirror sheen. Bright lights everywhere. Vending machines blinked like slot machines. The smooth buzz of automated announcements over the intercom made his skin itch. And the noise—god, the *noise*. People laughing, shouting into phones, dragging wheeled suitcases behind them like chains on tile. Horns from the pickup area blaring through the automatic doors. He winced at the screech of a squeaky cart wheel somewhere behind him.

Senku gritted his teeth and adjusted the strap of his bag.

He'd been gone for barely half a year.

It felt like ten.

Chrome frowned. "Why does he look so… I dunno. *Gray.*"

"Because this is wrong for him," Ukyo said quietly. "That space doesn't match the shape he's in anymore."

Yuzuriha looked close to tears again. "He looks like he doesn't know where he's supposed to be…"

Gen was analyzing the *hell* out of it. His brain was moving a mile a minute. *Everything* about Senku's presentation was off. Dilated pupils. Lack of micro-expression response. Reduced blink rate. Muscular tension in the neck and jaw. Gait fractionally too even—*compensating for inner imbalance.* And the sensory discomfort? That was new. Senku wasn't just disoriented. He was *raw.* Gen's hands twitched in his lap. *This isn't a case of simple readjustment.* This is sensory rejection layered over grief response, layered over culture dissonance, layered over *existential backlash.*

He doesn't feel like he belongs in his own country anymore.

Gen swallowed hard, fingers tightening slightly. His mind flipped to diagnostic mode.

Symptom cluster:
—Depersonalization.
—Sensory aversion.
—Cognitive dissociation.
—Muted affect.

His inner voice shouted: *Trauma adaptation without resolution. High-functioning dissociation. This is bad. This is textbook bad.*

As someone who'd once promised—*promised*—that he'd carry part of Senku's burden if it ever got too heavy. This was looking *damn close* to that.

His gaze was laser-focused—subtle to anyone else, maybe, but not to *Senku*.

Senku didn't look at him directly. Just adjusted his grip on the carry-on and muttered, voice hoarse with travel and too many hours of silence:

"…I said I'd let you pick apart the 3700 years in the void, mentalist. Not *this*. Don't get overzealous. It was a long time ago, come on."

It was dry. Flat. *Almost* a joke.

Almost.

Gen blinked—caught. His mouth twitched.

"I wasn't being zealous," he said smoothly. "Just… observant."

Senku side-eyed him. "Mhm."

“And maybe worried,” Gen added, quieter now.

Arrivals – Outside the Terminal

Byakuya stood just beyond the sliding doors, coat half-zipped and waving both arms like a human semaphore. His grin split his face.

“There’s my boy!” he called, like the whole airport wasn’t already watching. Senku blinked once. He could have sworn that he told the old man that he would take transit back home. Still, Senku found himself walking toward him, slow but steady. Byakuya grabbed him into a hug the second he was within reach. It was awkward —Senku’s backpack got caught between them, and his arms stayed pinned at his sides—but he didn’t pull away.

“Damn, you look taller,” Byakuya said into his hair. “And thinner. Eat anything over there?”

“Mostly starch and protein bars,” Senku muttered. “No beans out there." *Fortunately*

Byakuya pulled back and ruffled his hair. “Sounds awful. Good thing I stocked the kitchen.”

Senku snorted but didn’t argue. They walked together toward the parking structure.

Chrome blinked fast. “Aw, man… I didn’t know I was gonna cry again…”

Yuzuriha had her hands clasped tightly over her mouth. They all had been so lucky oto have Byakuya in their life and it was like every time he came up on the screen was a painful reminder of that, but she couldn't find it in herself to be pained, just grateful. “That’s… *so sweet.*”

Taiju smiled through watery eyes. “Of course Byakuya showed up. Of *course.* Even after Senku said he didn’t need it.”

Francois’s voice was quiet, but warm. “It seems that Byakuya understood what his son couldn’t say out loud.”

Ryusui glanced sideways, eyes catching on Senku's expression—tight, worn, but not crushed. He had support. Had history. A foundation built not on wealth or prestige, but on quiet presence. On *understanding*. And Ryusui? He'd grown up surrounded by marble floors, polished wood, and staff who bowed when he walked by. The butlers were sharp, attentive, respectful to the letter—but none of them were fathers. None of them tucked him in at night or reminded him to sleep or asked if he was *okay*.

Admittedly he was a little jealous. He wanted everything, but this wasn't something that he could buy.

Francois had done more for him than anyone else ever had. But they weren't his family. Not really.

Francois, without even turning, gently straightened Ryusui's collar. A quiet, familiar motion that didn't need words.

He just sat a little straighter—and kept watching.

> The city sped past the windows in quiet, neon-colored blurs. Senku leaned his forehead against the glass, watching commuters in their matching uniforms, buildings wrapped in advertisements, the rhythmic dance of stoplights like a machine that had forgotten how to feel. Everything was too clean. Too rigid. Too detached. The roads didn't smell like heat or iron-rich water. The signs were pristine. There were no dust clouds kicked up by dry boots or half-shouted jokes across a makeshift campfire. Everything here was streamlined, artificial, untouched by outbreak or dust or grief.
>
> Senku's fingers tapped against his thigh in a steady rhythm. One-two. One-two.

He hadn't even realized he was doing it. He did it all the time now. Without thinking. In perfect seconds—like an internal metronome built from pressure and habit. But back then? In Africa? Watching the screen, he'd noticed something odd. He'd tapped then, too. Just not the same way. It wasn't rhythmic. Wasn't measured. Back then, it was chaotic. Distracted. Less of a tool and more of a *twitch*—raw motor overflow spilling out through his hands when the pressure got too much to hold inside his skull.

Now he watched it like an outsider. Like the scientist again. And it was… *fascinating*.

A behavior adaptation developed entirely from trauma conditioning and cognitive overload. Neurologically speaking, it was a form of environmental grounding. Motor pattern repurposing. His brain had needed something to *track*—so it gave him the seconds.

Senku's eyes narrowed slightly.

He glanced sideways at Gen, just for a second, then back to the TV.

He'd said Gen could interview him about the 3,700 years. And he still meant it.

But now…

Now he was wondering if he should let the mentalist poke into this part too. Senku was always down to be the subject of a rare data set—especially one no one else could provide.

Science was science.

"Feels off, doesn't it?" Byakuya asked gently, not taking his eyes off the road.

Senku grunted in agreement.

"Your brain got used to a whole different life out there. It's normal."

"It's not normal," Senku muttered. "It's loud. It's sterile. It's... Not right. Too soon."

Watching it now, the older Senku didn't move. His arms were folded across his chest, face unreadable—but *he felt it*. That moment. That version of himself, freshly shattered and still pretending he hadn't been. He remembered how the seatbelt had pressed too

tight against his chest. How the air smelled too filtered. How his fingers had twitched in precise seconds the entire ride and he hadn't even noticed. And he remembered Byakuya's tone. Warm. Unshaken. Gently pulling him back without making it obvious.

Senku's mouth tightened just slightly.

He really did know me, he thought. *Too well.*

Intuitive. Calm. Disarming in a way most people weren't. The kind of person who could get past Senku's defenses without breaking them. The kind of person who *made space* for you, instead of trying to take it away. Senku's eyes narrowed faintly, watching Byakuya's smile onscreen. *A lot like Gen,* his mind supplied. It wasn't a comparison he'd wanted to make—but it was there. Same infuriating perceptiveness. Same refusal to push. Same ability to *see him*, even when Senku wasn't saying anything at all.

A bitter little thought clawed its way up in his chest before he could stop it:

If Byakuya had gone into medicine… into psychology or therapy or anything adjacent… maybe he would've been on Earth. Maybe he'd be petrified somewhere. Maybe I could've brought him back.

But he hadn't.

And he wasn't.

And Senku knew better than to dwell on impossibilities—but for a second, just a flicker—he let himself sit with it.

> The rhythm of Tokyo had continued without him. Seamlessly. Like the last five months had never happened. But *he* had changed. His fingers curled briefly against his knee. The texture of his pants was too smooth. His seat too soft. Everything was wrong. Byakuya didn't say anything right away. Then—

"Still. It's home."

Senku didn't respond. The silence pressed in around him, thick and sterile, and for the first time since boarding the plane, Senku felt like he couldn't breathe. Not because of grief or trauma—he'd boxed those up already. He knew how to store grief like data. But here? With the glow of vending machines and orderly traffic? Here, it felt like everything that happened had been… overwritten. He closed his eyes. For just a second, he could still smell ethanol and cracked gloves. Hear the scrape of Luis's lighter, the rustle of Ada's scarf, the scratch of her handwriting on case reports. His chest tightened.

"Everything's too quiet," he muttered finally. "The wrong kind of quiet."

Byakuya only nodded. "Takes time."

Senku didn't want it to take time.

In the present, Gen's voice was soft, but clear. "It's a real thing, you know," he said, addressing the room but *clearly* thinking of the boy beside him. "People call it sensory dissonance or environment mismatch. After a long period in high-stress zones—especially ones with irregular noise patterns or threat-driven sounds—the brain adjusts. It learns to filter chaos."

He leaned forward slightly, fingers laced in front of him. "So when that's gone? When everything is sterile and predictable and *civilized* again? The body doesn't read it as safe. It reads it as wrong. Like something's missing. It's not really about peace. It's about the absence of signals you've trained yourself to expect. And the brain doesn't like sudden absences. That's when the real weight hits."

Chrome was quiet, watching the screen, brow furrowed.

Yuzuriha pressed a hand to her mouth, eyes wide.

Ukyo murmured a touch rueful, a little too knowingly, "Like silence in a jungle. It means something's *off*."

Gen nodded once. "Exactly."

Senku didn’t speak. But his fingers tapped against his leg again, once. Then twice. The seconds were always there. He tried to remind himself that they were almost done, they were almost out of this chapter of his life, but is still rung to him negatively, he wanted this to be over already, wanted to at least be reacting to things in the Stone World, things that didn't hurt nearly this much. You don't always get what you wish for.

He wanted the numbness to lift. He wanted the rhythm of fieldwork back. The sharp sting of ammonia in the air. The unpredictability. The variables. The friction that kept his brain in motion. Here, it felt like someone had hit pause. They pulled into the driveway a few minutes later. The porch light flicked on automatically—soft yellow in the growing dusk. Senku didn’t move.

Byakuya didn’t push.

Eventually, Senku opened the door and stepped out into the stillness of suburban Japan. He didn’t say anything. Just followed his father to the door. Inside, the scent of curry and something vaguely legumey hit him.

Byakuya glanced back with a wry smile. “Pork curry and three kinds of beans.”

Senku tried to joke, but it came out weakly, “Some things never change.”

“Good thing, too,” Byakuya replied, setting down the grocery bags. “You’d lose your sense of reality without your daily bean calibration.”

Senku didn’t argue. He sat at the table and stared at the quiet flicker of the stove flame while his old man plated food. He was back. But it didn’t feel like it.

Ryusui, from his spot on the couch, let out a slow breath and clapped his hands once—sharp and theatrical. “Alright, I’m saying it,” he announced. “There’s no *way* I would’ve survived that household. If I had to eat three-bean curry as a staple of emotional grounding, I would’ve walked into the sea.”

Francois didn’t even blink. “It would not have been the sea, sir. Most likely the nearest gourmet establishment with standards above ‘edible.’”

That got a choked laugh from Chrome and a soft giggle from Yuzuriha, who was still wiping the corners of her eyes.

“I mean, come on,” Ryusui continued, warming to the bit. “You expect a man of my culinary sensibilities to *live* on legumes and whatever dusty spices he found in the back of a half-stocked suburban pantry? Please. I need you, Francois. Please never leave me.”

Francois replied smoothly. “I'm sure you could survive sir. I simply happen to be the only one willing to preserve your palate *and* your pride.”

Even Gen huffed a laugh, the moment landing gently—like a pressure valve released.

> The apartment was just like he’d left it. That was part of the problem. Same dusty stack of old science magazines. Same sagging couch. Same note on the fridge that said *“Do Not Microwave Metal”* in Senku’s handwriting. *Same notes that he created when he was trying to get this internship with* -- Byakuya had cleaned, though. Senku could tell. And sure enough, the pantry had been stocked with his favorites. The cupboard even had a new electric kettle—the kind that boiled water in less than a minute. Senku sat at the kitchen table, hands curled around a steaming mug of bitter coffee. His fingers didn’t tremble, but they felt too still.
>
> They ate in relative silence. The kind that wasn’t uncomfortable—just full.
>
> Afterward, Senku sat by the window, notebook on his lap, and stared at a blank page. He didn’t write anything. Not yet. But he was *thinking* again. That restless itch in his brain wasn’t gone—it was just pacing. Waiting for the next impossible problem. That night, when he finally climbed into bed, Senku dreamed of red dust and microscopes. Of Okoye's crooked grin. Of Rajiv’s terrible puns. Of Luis checking the truck tires at dawn.
>
> And of science. Of questions without answers.
>
> And the ones still waiting to be asked.

Ukyo sat in silence for a long beat after the playback ended for a brief pause. He looked at Senku. Not with pity. Not even with concern, exactly. Just quiet understanding. Like something had *clicked* into place that he hadn’t realized was crooked until now. Senku didn’t notice. He was still staring at the screen, eyes slightly narrowed, lost in whatever calculations or echoes were taking up space in his brain.

Ukyo leaned forward just enough to get Gen’s attention. His voice was low.

“Hey,” he murmured, still watching Senku. “Do you think I could talk to him? On break?”

Gen blinked, then tilted his head. “Course you can,” he said gently. “He’ll listen to you.”

Ukyo didn’t reply to that. He just nodded once, more to himself than anyone else.

From across the room, Ryusui was watching him now—not intrusively, but with interest. The kind of curiosity he saved for people he respected. He didn’t interrupt. Didn’t tease. Just leaned back in his chair and studied Ukyo’s profile, thoughtful.

Because if *Ukyo* was asking for a moment?

Interesting.

> It had been three days since he landed back in Japan. Senku hadn’t reached out to anyone. Not because he didn’t want to—but because he wasn’t sure *what* he wanted. The days bled together in an odd blur of jet lag, silence, and books he couldn’t seem to focus on. So when the knock came at the door, he didn’t expect it. He answered anyway, already annoyed by the sound—and blinked.
>
> Taiju grinned sheepishly from the porch, Yuzuriha beside him with a paper bag in her hands. “Hey. Your dad said you were back.”
>
> Senku’s eyes narrowed. “Tch. Did he now.”
>
> “He thought seeing us might help.” Yuzuriha’s tone was gentle but not overly cautious. “You don’t have to let us in if it’s a bad time.”
>
> Senku leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. He was quiet long enough for Taiju to fidget with the hem of his hoodie.

“I’m glad we went,” Taiju said finally, not bothering to lower his voice. “But… Do you think we should’ve come sooner?”

Yuzuriha turned her head, startled by the question—but didn't dismiss it. "I was thinking the same thing," She admitted. "I mean… He didn't call. But maybe we should've just shown up anyway."

Senku, who had been completely quiet for quite some time, broke his stairing contest with the screen. He sighed and rubbed a hand down his face. "No. Don't be stupid, you big oaf."

Taiju blinked at him. "Huh?"

"It wasn't about you," Senku muttered. "It was just a time thing. My brain was still booting up."

Yuzuriha's expression softened, even if she still looked unsure. "Are you sure?"

Senku didn't look at her directly. "Yeah. Trust me. If I didn't want to see you, I wouldn't have answered the door."

Taiju grinned wide, clearly relieved, but then paused again—brow furrowing. "So… We didn't screw up?"

Senku shot him a flat look. "You're literally on the screen *showing up with snacks*. That's the opposite of screwing up."

Taiju let out a giant sigh of relief and collapsed backward in his seat like he'd just completed a marathon. "Okay good! 'Cause I was really scared we waited too long and made you feel worse and I've been feeling *so bad* about it—"

"Taiju," Senku said wearily.

"Yeah?"

“Shut up.”

“Right. Okay.” He gave a thumbs-up. “Shutting up now.”

But he was smiling. And so was Yuzuriha.

“…You brought snacks?” Senku finally asked, eyeing the bag.

“Of course we did,” Taiju said quickly. “You always forget to eat when you’re sulking.”

“I’m not sulking,” Senku muttered, but stepped back to let them in anyway.

The house felt cooler than it should, even with the windows shut. The lights stayed off. Senku dropped onto the couch as they filed in, his posture slouched and disinterested—except for the way his eyes kept flicking toward the bag Yuzuriha was now unpacking. Rice crackers. Instant miso. Chocolate-covered almonds. Stuff he wouldn’t ask for but definitely wouldn’t say no to, either.

Yuzuriha smiled faintly as she set everything on the low table. “You’ve been home for a few days now. How are you doing?”

Senku shrugged. “Fine.”

“Senku…”

“I saw people die.” He said it too casually. “Some of them were good. One of them was better than most. There’s not really a *good* way to be after that.”

Francois folded their hands gently in their lap, eyes thoughtful as the screen settled into the heavy moment. They glanced toward Senku—then back toward the quiet image of past-Senku on the couch, slouched and disheveled in the dim light, surrounded by snacks he clearly didn’t ask for but desperately needed.

Their voice was soft, but deliberate. “If I may, Master Senku… Why didn’t you tell them more?”

Senku didn’t react immediately.

Francois continued with the same gentle tone. “They would have stayed. They would have understood. You had just lost someone who meant a great deal to you—your mentor, if I understand the timeline correctly. Why not say it plainly?”

There was a pause—longer than expected. Even Taiju and Yuzuriha looked toward him now, surprised by the question.

Senku's fingers tapped once against his knee before he answered. “Because I didn’t know how to say it without it sounding like an excuse.”

Yuzuriha blinked. “An excuse…?”

He looked away, jaw tight. “I was… not okay. But I didn’t want them worrying. I didn’t want it to *define* it. If I told them what she was to me, I’d have to explain *why* she mattered. And I wasn’t ready for that. It was too close. Too fresh.”

Gen, quiet until now, murmured, “It would’ve made it real when you were still trying to push it away."

Senku didn’t deny it.

Francois inclined their head, not judging. “Grief is not weakness. Acknowledging someone’s impact on you… that is not self-indulgence. Especially when it shapes the person you are.”

Senku gave a faint snort. “Yeah, well. I figured that out about three thousand years too late.”

Ukyo looked down, “It makes sense,” he said quietly. “Sometimes silence feels safer. Like the moment you say it out loud, you’ll fall apart.”

Ryusui blew out a breath through his nose. “Tch. I hate that I get that.”

Taiju shifted uncomfortably. “I’m sorry, man.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Senku said, sharper than intended.

Taiju nodded, then looked around. “Wanna… play a board game or something? I brought the one you like, with the hexagons and weird math tiles.”

Senku blinked. “The one you never win?”

“Hey, I won once!”

Senku didn’t smile. Not really. But the corner of his mouth *twitched*, just enough for Yuzuriha to quietly hand him a wrapped rice cracker.

“I’m not gonna talk,” Senku muttered, accepting it. “Not yet.” *Probably not ever.*

“He’s not avoiding here,” Gen murmured aloud, almost surprised by his own realization. “He’s setting a boundary.”

Francois glanced toward him, mildly curious. Gen didn’t break his focus from the screen.

“He’s telling them what he needs without softening it, and they’re respecting it. That’s…” He paused, lips quirking faintly. “Actually pretty healthy.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait—being short with people is *healthy*?”

“No,” Gen said, smiling now. “But being direct about what you *can* and *can’t* handle in a moment? That’s a form of emotional intelligence most adults never master.”

He folded his arms, tapping a finger lightly to his chin. “And it’s not just now. He’s always done it. He did it with me. With Ryusui. Even with Byakuya. The line between *I care* and *don’t push me*—it’s always there. Even when he’s not fully aware of it.”

Senku didn’t say anything from his seat beside Gen, but his ankle shifted against Gen’s again—just slightly. Not to pull away. Just enough to say he’d heard him. Gen smiled inwardly. Boundary-setting. Physical contact. Emotional regulation. He was collecting *so* much data.

“That’s fine,” Yuzuriha said, settling beside Taiju on the floor. “We just didn’t want you to sit in the dark alone.”

Senku didn’t respond, but he didn’t move away, either. Taiju pulled out the board game and started organizing pieces. Yuzuriha lit the electric kettle. Senku stayed quiet on the couch, eyes half-lidded. He didn’t ask if his old man had put them up to it. He didn’t need to. Either way it was the same result. But strangely… he didn’t mind.

Gen let out a soft, almost fond exhale as he watched the screen. “See?” he said quietly, tipping his head toward the others. “They’re doing it right.”

Chrome raised an eyebrow. “Doing what?”

“Respecting boundaries,” Gen said. “You don’t have to be a mind reader to know Senku’s not exactly a fan of spontaneous emotional intervention. But look at them—they’re keeping it low-pressure. No big speeches. No hovering. Just... staying nearby.”

Ukyo nodded thoughtfully. “Holding space without forcing conversation.”

“Exactly,” Gen said. “That’s a rare skill.”

Ryusui crossed his arms, smiling crookedly. “Except when Taiju goes for those full-body bear hugs without warning.”

“Mm,” Francois murmured. “The ‘naked’ ones, if I recall.”

Yuzuriha turned bright red. “That was *one time*! And it was *because he panicked*! Senku lived!”

“And yet, the big oafs immediately urge to hug me butt ass naked made me want to hit the ground and dig a grave,” Senku muttered flatly from his seat.

Gen smirked, the edge of laughing, “Still, they’re the exceptions that prove the rule. Otherwise? They’re very good at tuning into him. Yuzuriha especially. She knows when not to push. And he let them stay,” Gen added, quieter now. “That’s the real tell.”

The clock on the wall ticked past midnight.

Senku hadn’t noticed. They had left at some point, and Senku had moved listlessly.

His workbench was covered in half-finished notes, tools scattered like debris from a shipwreck. A soldering iron lay cold beside a set of wires he’d stopped connecting hours ago. The circuitry diagram he’d started was smudged with the heel of his palm. None of it was right. None of it *mattered*. The silence of the house pressed in. Even the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen seemed too loud.

Senku exhaled slowly and looked down at his shaking hands.

Senku's shoulders had drawn slightly inward without him noticing. His eyes, still locked on the image of himself alone at the workbench, weren’t sharp anymore. They were distant. Hollowed out in a way that made even Gen sit up straighter.

Across the couch, Chrome’s foot tapped once against the floor before stilling. Kohaku glanced between the screen and Senku, lips parting slightly like she wanted to say something—but didn’t. Because they all realized it at once. They could tell that they were about to get smacked with emotions again by the reactions of the Senku's both on screen and sitting in the room next to them. The room held its breath. Even Ryusui didn’t have a quip ready.

Gen’s gaze slid to the side—toward the man next to him, the one who had earlier teased back and brushed ankles like a secret language. But right now, there was no spark. No flint-strike of science in his expression. Just a boy who looked like he had remembered, too late, exactly where they were in the playback.

Senku blinked once.

Twice.

Then his fingers—resting against his leg—began to tap. Soft. Measured. One-two. One-two.

Gen leaned just a fraction closer and kept his voice low, not even looking his way. He knew it wouldn't help, not with a memory like Senku's, “You’re not there now, you know.”

> No tremor of illness. No signs of exhaustion, despite the fact that he hadn’t slept more than two hours a night since returning to Japan. Just… static. A constant, crackling buzz behind his eyes. He couldn’t focus. Every time he tried, the thoughts twisted sideways. He tried to pick up the wire again—tried to remind himself that he had projects to finish. Work to do. Plans to make.
>
> But his hands wouldn’t stop twitching. His vision blurred, not with tears—*not yet*—but with something heavier. Something behind his eyes. Something pressing at the edges of his skull like an overloaded capacitor, ready to snap.
>
> Without thinking, his fingers moved.
>
> Two pressed against his temple. The motion was practiced. Familiar. Conditioned.
>
> Ada’s technique. He remembered the first time he saw her do it—standing under the tin roof of the field tent, dust in her hair, boots streaked with blood and red soil, eyes locked on the chaos around her. She’d touched her temple with those fingers and stared ahead like nothing could shake her. Senku had copied the motion a hundred times since. He pressed harder now, trying to find that stillness. That control. He squeezed his eyes shut.
>
> And her voice echoed.

Yuzuriha’s hands curled in her lap. She didn’t cry this time, it felt like she had already used all her tears, but her lips were pressed so tightly together they lost all color. The sight of

Senku—alone, shaking, trying so hard to find stillness where there was none—hit her somewhere deep. Somewhere personal. She thought about the way he hadn't asked them to stay. She thought about the way he hadn't looked like this when they were there.

And then, with a soft breath, she understood.

This wasn't something he *would* have let them see.

Not because he didn't trust them. Not because he didn't care. But because grief, for Senku, wasn't loud. It wasn't cathartic. It wasn't built for comfort or company. It was precision under pressure. Grief, for Senku, was private. It was different for her, she knew. She preferred to spend her grief around the people she cared about, comforting and being comforted in turn, but Senku was a little different.

She swallowed hard and blinked fast.

Beside her, Taiju's fists were tight in his lap, his brow furrowed in that helpless, frustrated way of his. The way that said *I should've done something*, even if there had been nothing to do.

Maybe if we'd stayed longer, he thought, *maybe if we'd—*

But then he glanced at Yuzuriha, and the way her face had softened—not with sadness, but with realization as she shook her head. They must have done what they could then.

> *"You don't let the panic in. You push it all to the edge. Condition your brain to listen to you, not the world. That's how we survive out here."*
>
> He dug his fingers harder into his temple. It wasn't working. The static got louder. The air in the room was wrong. Too still. Too cold. There was no copper tang of blood in the air. No whir of distant generators. No Rajiv humming off-key in the next tent. No Luis yelling about inventory.
>
> No Ada.

Senku's hand dropped to the desk with a clatter.

And the tears came.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Silent. Steady. Unstoppable.

He bowed his head, fingers curled against the edge of the table. His shoulders shook, but he made no sound. His chest felt tight, as if the air had grown heavier just to spite him. The world blurred. The room blurred. His own body felt *wrong*—as if it didn't belong here. As if it had never left the place where the dirt was red and the death rate was 70 percent and the people he admired didn't die in hospital beds gasping for air.

His breath hitched—just once.

Grief had weight—fragile and deafening all at once. Chrome was the first to break. He covered his mouth with one hand, tears slipping from his eyes as he watched the younger version of his mentor unravel on screen. It wasn't loud. It wasn't dramatic. But it hit like a punch to the ribs. He tried to hold it back. He really did.

He failed.

Yuzuriha was crying too, silent and soft, her fingers curled around the hem of her shirt. She wasn't sure where she managed to find the water after all the crying earlier. She didn't try to wipe her face. Just let it happen. The look on her face wasn't shock. It was heartbreak. Compassion. The kind that said *I wish I could do something,* even when she knew she couldn't.

Taiju's shoulders trembled beside her. His hands were clenched, fists digging into his knees as if he could hold something back by force alone. He bit his lip hard enough to leave a mark. But when he saw Senku on the screen, head bowed, shoulders shaking—He lost it. The tears spilled down his face in long, quiet streaks. He didn't sob. Didn't shout. But the sheer pain on his face made it clear that holding it in had never been an option. "Senku…" he whispered, so softly only Yuzuriha heard.

She took his hand.

On the other side of the room, Ukyo sat very still. His eyes were dry, but the tension in his posture said it all—like every muscle was wound tight. He stared at the screen, jaw tight, hearing every rustle, every breath, every drop of grief in excruciating clarity. He didn't look at Senku, but he didn't look away from the screen either. Not once.

Francois' hands were folded in their lap, her expression unreadable. But their gaze was gentle. Almost reverent. A butler knew when to speak, and when not to. This was not the time.

Gen… saw it. The faint tilt of Senku's head. The way his hand hovered by his mouth like he wasn't sure what to do with it. The slight tremble in his shoulders. The downward angle of his gaze, unfocused and unseeing. The shine in his eyes. The slow blink that failed to clear it. The tears came—not many, not loudly. But they came. Quiet. Earnest. Real. And no one else saw it, because Senku was silent when he cried. His own personal universe collapsing behind a mask of detachment, his grief trickling out like a leak in a sealed pipe. Steady. Controlled. But unstoppable.

Ruefully, Gen had to admit, Senku was a pretty crier.

Gen would have done anything to not have to know that.

> Not because he couldn't take it. But because he *had* taken it. All of it. Every second of it. And now there was nowhere left to put it. Senku tilted forward, forehead resting against his arms, tears pooling quietly in the crook of his elbow. His body trembled.
>
> She should have made it.
>
> Dr. Ada Okoye was brilliant. She was fierce. She was indestructible.
>
> She was gone.
>
> He didn't get to say goodbye properly.
>
> Didn't get to save her.
>
> Didn't even get to *try*.

Gen's jaw was locked so tight it ached. His arms remained folded, body still, but inside, everything was *moving*. Screaming, really. Not out loud—he'd learned a long time ago how to silence that—but his thoughts spun like a centrifuge. Trying to catalog each feeling, give it a label, a purpose, a rationale.

He was *not* detached.
He was *not* okay.

But he was a professional. And the worst part was, it *wasn't* just Senku's pain. That would've been easier—easier to comfort, easier to contain. But Gen felt it too. *They all did*. The whole crew, everyone watching this, had grown attached to Ada. Even if it was through screens, through memories—she had mattered. Fiercely. Beautifully. She had mattered to *Senku*. And seeing *him* like this—shaking, silent, barely able to sit upright—was… devastating.

Gen wanted to cry.

And maybe he *would*. Later. But right now, he did what he was best at. He kept it together. He kept it *contained*. He imagined building little walls in his mind—compartments, filters, shields. Layer after layer to keep the grief from spilling out at the wrong time, because Senku didn't need his grief. Senku didn't need him to collapse too. Senku needed *stability*. Even unspoken. And deep down, behind all his clever words and wry smiles and emotional armor, one thought repeated like a silent drumbeat in his chest:

She should have made it too.

> The same mind that had solved complex chemistry problems at age six, that had deconstructed rocket engineering for fun, that had once calculated launch trajectory using marbles and a measuring tape—*had done nothing*. He couldn't stop her hands from shaking. He couldn't stabilize her vitals. He couldn't keep her conscious. He'd held a woman smarter and stronger than most people on the planet while she *slipped away*, and all the science in the world had failed him.
>
> He *hated* that.
>
> And it *hurt*.
>
> Senku stayed like that for a long time, curled over his desk in a dark room full of half-built machines. The first time in years that he truly broke down. The first time in years that he allowed himself to mourn. And somewhere in the blur of tears, his fingers still twitched toward his temple—seeking order.
>
> All he found was more quiet tears.

None of them spoke.

Not a single word.

The playback room was *silent*—the kind of silence that presses against your ears and throat until even breathing feels like it might be too loud. The screen cast a pale glow over the floor, the only movement the flicker of light on still shoulders, still faces.

Yuzuriha's hands were still clenched in her lap, knuckles white, tears streaming freely down her face. Chrome had leaned forward, his face buried in his arms, shoulders shaking just a little. Taiju looked stunned—eyes rimmed red, jaw clenched, like he didn't know *what* to do with the pain tearing its way through him. He'd seen Senku sad. Tired. Even furious. But this? This was something else. This was watching someone *break*. Ukyo had his eyes shut, body still, the sharp angle of his jaw the only sign that he, too, was fighting off the ache behind his eyes. Kohaku sat frozen, expression unreadable but her chest rising and falling faster than normal. Even Ryusui had gone completely still, no smile, no words, just quietly gripping the edge of his chair like it was the only thing keeping him grounded.

The house was quiet. Too quiet for Byakuya's liking. He knew Senku was home—hadn't heard him move from his workbench all evening. No clatter of tools. No muttered calculations. No arguments with the television over inaccurate documentaries. It had been like that for some time, and it seemed that the visit from his friends hadn't helped.

Just silence.

Byakuya padded down the hallway in his socks, a warm cup of tea in one hand, not really sure if he planned to talk or just leave it at his door. But when he stepped into the open doorway, the sight stopped him cold. Senku was slumped forward over his desk, his usual rigid posture crumpled in on itself. His shoulders trembled, his face buried in his arms, and though he made no sound, the quiet shake of his breath told the truth. Byakuya didn't speak. He didn't ask what was wrong. He just set the tea down carefully on the desk beside him, the cup clinking softly against the wood. Senku didn't move. Didn't pretend he was fine.

Didn't snap out a snarky comment or shift away with that usual exasperated edge.

He stayed still.

Byakuya stepped closer. Slowly. Gently. Like approaching something fragile. His hands hovered for just a second—unsure, even now. But Senku didn't pull away. So Byakuya lowered himself beside his son and, with the same careful hands that had taught him to

hold test tubes steady and tie his shoes before he could spell his own name, wrapped his arms around him. Senku didn't cry harder. He just *breathed*—a quiet, stuttered breath that collapsed into his father's chest, and for the first time in years, he let himself *lean*.

In the present, Senku's breath hitched again. Not loud. Not dramatic. But deep. Painful. His shoulders trembled, and his fingers curled into his own pant leg like he was trying to hold onto *something*. Anything.

Gen didn't look away.

He couldn't, even though he knew Senku would probably prefer it if he did.

He bit his lip so hard it stung—trying, failing, to keep the ache in his throat from climbing up past the shields he kept so carefully in place. Because this? This was the one thing he couldn't analyze away. Couldn't soothe with a joke or a quiet press of ankle against ankle.

Francois had turned ever so slightly away, but one silent tear slid down their cheek. Dignified. Controlled. But no less real.

Ryusui had his hand over his face, fingers pressing hard into his temple. "Damn," he muttered. Just that. Nothing else. Because what *could* you say?

The way that Senku cried... Not loud. Not theatrical. But honest. Shoulders trembling. Tears running unchecked down his cheeks. A soft gasp of air now and then when it got too tight in his chest. And Gen—Gen couldn't help but push himself closer, hand lightly resting against his sleeve, their ankles still touching like it was the only tether they had left.

No words. No explanations. Just weight shared.

Byakuya rested his chin lightly against Senku's hair.

"I'm here, kid," he murmured, voice steady. "I've got you."

That was the moment Senku broke. Not a silent crack. Not a restrained blink of tears or a subtle shift in posture. No. This was *shattering*.

It was grief not for Ada, but for his father.

This... Was the kind of breaking that didn't have rules. That didn't obey logic or efficiency or dignity. One second he was breathing. The next, the sound left him like a gasp caught in barbed wire. A choked inhale—then another. His shoulders hunched forward, spine curling tight like he was folding in on himself to protect something that had already been ripped out of him.

Gen reached for him instantly, moving his hand from his sleeve to slide it onto his back.

But Senku didn't even notice.

Because *Byakuya was gone*.

That voice, that warmth, that grounding comfort—that wasn't real anymore. It had been. Once. Long ago, in a life made of beakers and curry beans and the quiet safety of a dad who never asked for more than Senku could give. But that man had died thousands of years ago on a petrified earth. And Senku had never gotten to say goodbye to him either. So now it was all crashing together. *Ada*. *Byakuya*. The playback. The grief. The impossible weight of being sixteen and brilliant and *alone* in a room full of dying patients. The unbearable reality of being *alive* when they weren't.

His face crumpled. A sob broke free—quiet, hoarse, but *real*. And then another. And another. Until his whole body shook with it.

Ryusui—eternally bold, perpetually smug Ryusui—had turned his head slightly, jaw set, blinking fast against the moisture gathering in his eyes.

Kohaku had curled her arms around her middle like she was trying to hold herself together. One tear. Two. Then more.

Gen had his hand on Senku's back, steady and sure, even as his own eyes filled.

Senku's fingers curled into the front of his father's shirt, gripping it like he was holding onto gravity itself. No experiment could reverse this. No formula could solve this kind of loss. And in that rare moment, Senku let himself be what he was—a sixteen-year-old kid who'd spent the last four months outrunning grief. He stopped running and started feeling. Byakuya stayed with him until the shaking slowed. Until his breathing evened out. Until the tension in his spine uncoiled just enough to stop aching.

Eventually, Senku pulled away, wiping his face with his sleeve in his usual, practical way.

"…That was pathetic."

Byakuya smiled faintly. "That was human."

Senku grunted. "Old man…"

Ukyo was the first to quietly inhale through his nose, fingers folded together in his lap, trying to keep himself centered. Kohaku wiped at her cheeks, firm and brisk, pretending not to notice how her own hands were shaking. Chrome's sniffle was quickly covered by a cough, as if redirecting the sound would make it less real. Yuzuriha pressed both palms against her eyes. Taiju leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, tears still sliding down his face but no longer gasping with each one.

Francois's head bowed in reverence, composed again—but their hands stayed gently laced in front of them, motionless.

Ryusui exhaled hard and scrubbed a hand through his hair like he could shake the sadness off. But his eyes were rimmed red.

Gen still had his hand pressed flat to Senku's back, just enough pressure to remind him that someone was *there*. That someone *saw* him. Present Senku sat hunched forward, pinching the bridge of his nose with forefinger and thumb. His breath came slow—measured. Controlled.

The technique was deliberate, practiced. One of many coping tools he'd perfected over the years.

His other hand rested in his lap, trembling faintly.

And he didn't pull away.

Not from Gen.

In fact, his body leaned into the touch, barely noticeable—but it was there. A quiet admission that he didn't want to push it away. That it helped. That the contact, however small, was *anchoring* him.

He simply let Senku breathe.

On the screen, the younger Senku wiped his face with brisk, embarrassed efficiency. "...That was pathetic."

Byakuya's voice came soft, warm. "That was human."

Senku grunted. "Old man…"

Present Senku's hand dropped from his face. He exhaled hard. And for a second, the tension in his jaw eased.

> He didn't move far. Just leaned back against the desk, the space between them filled with a quiet understanding. Byakuya didn't press, didn't try to fix it. This wasn't pain that needed fixing. It just needed someone to stay. Someone to listen. And if there was one thing Byakuya would *always* do—it was listen to Senku. Then Senku glanced at him sidelong, voice hoarse, eyes still damp, "You do realize you just hugged your

teenage son who's been illegally brewing and consuming alcohol in a high-risk viral zone for the past few months."

It was delivered with as much sharp wit as he could manage—but the edges cracked a little. Byakuya blinked—then let out a soft laugh, the sound carrying more *relief* than amusement.

There you are, kid.

"You're lucky I'm not the arresting type," he said gently, his voice touched with something like hope.

Yuzuriha let out a half-laugh through her tears, swiping her sleeve under her eyes with a watery little hiccup. "I can't believe you *told* him!"

Kohaku's head dropped slightly, hiding her own trembling smile. Chrome laughed too—quiet and choked—but full of stunned disbelief.

"Senku," Taiju muttered, rubbing at his nose. "You really said that?"

Present Senku didn't look up quite yet. But the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed him again. A tiny smirk, fragile but real, curled and cracked like an old leaf.

"He was gonna find out eventually," He muttered.

Gen huffed softly beside him, voice warm and dry. "Yeah, only because you apparently would have told him eventually. You're lucky he was the type to laugh about it instead of reporting you. You ever see those American TV shows, I think one of them was called scared straight?"

"Please," Senku said, almost deadpan, but softer than usual. "Byakuya couldn't report anyone. Don't let that innocent look fool you, he told me plenty of stories. He was a a self proclaimed wild child, apparently that was how he met my parents in the first place."

That startled a more genuine laugh from Yuzuriha.

“He *what*?!”

> “I smoked too,” Senku added, rubbing at his eyes again. “On my birthday. I think you would’ve hated them.”
>
> Byakuya paused… then smiled with something softer, deeper. “I would never hate someone you cared about this much.”
>
> He meant it. Even if he wasn’t thrilled about the specifics, even if there’d be a long-overdue health talk in Senku’s future—one Senku would *desperately* try to avoid—he wouldn’t fault his son for loving the people who got him through something that hard. Especially not when he saw how much it still hurt. It wasn’t smooth. It wasn’t polished. But it was *him*. And Byakuya knew—without needing to hear the words—that this was Senku trying.
>
> They sat in silence for another moment, the air still heavy but less suffocating now. Then Byakuya gently pushed the still-warm cup of tea toward him.
>
> “Drink. Hydration is a scientific necessity.”
>
> Senku gave a weak snort, but didn’t argue. He took the cup, still sniffling softly, and drank.

Taiju clutched his chest like it physically *hurt*. “*He confessed the smoking too?!*”

“Oh my *god*,” Chrome whispered. “Kid Senku is adorable.”

“He’s a *mess*,” Kohaku corrected, voice thick with emotion. “But yes. Adorable.”

“God,” Yuzuriha whispered, hands pressed to her mouth. “That line. I'm glad that Senku admitted it though, that way just in case he did have some sort of issue with addiction his dad could have helped him. Of course we know that Senku didn't, but still, better safe than sorry. I mean... Sorry Senku."

Yuzuriha stumbled a little bit.

> The warmth helped. Just a little. But it was a start. Byakuya had stayed quiet, giving him space. That was one of the things Senku had always appreciated about his dad—he didn't fill silences just to fill them. He waited, steady, present. And when Senku finally spoke again, it wasn't with the sharpness he usually used to keep people at bay.
>
> "She wasn't like the others," he murmured, fingers still lightly tapping the side of his cup. "Dr. Ada Okoye. She didn't care that I was fifteen. Didn't treat me like a kid. She just… expected me to keep up."
>
> Byakuya nodded, gently encouraging, but didn't interrupt.
>
> "She had this way of focusing," Senku continued, his eyes distant now. "Used her fingers, like this—" He demonstrated, holding up his fingers to his head, "Said she conditioned herself to do it. Block out panic, background noise. It became muscle memory. Precision under pressure."
>
> Byakuya smiled faintly. "Sounds like something you would like."
>
> Senku huffed quietly. "Tch. I picked it up without thinking. Didn't even notice until I was already doing it."

Chrome squinted at the screen, brows furrowing. "Wait a second… that's not true."

Kohaku glanced over. "What do you mean?"

"I *saw* him start doing it," Chrome said, voice soft with confusion. "In the playback. He looked right at her and copied it *on purpose.* He even explained it to someone else later. Said it made sense. That it was efficient."

Yuzuriha blinked. "So… he's lying?"

Francois folded her hands, watching with quiet interest. "Not lying. Not quite. That—" They nodded toward the screen, where Senku gave a vague little shrug— "That's a dodge."

Gen's lips twitched, not in amusement this time, but in something closer to ache. "He's embarrassed."

Ukyo tilted his head. "Embarrassed? Why?"

"Because it's *sentimental.*" Gen's voice was gentle now. "He admitted to alcohol. To *smoking.* But not to this. Not to keeping a part of her with him." His eyes didn't leave Senku on the screen. "Because this wasn't survival. This was… memory. Affection. Maybe even grief. And Senku doesn't know how to talk about that. Not when it's this close."

Chrome's mouth opened, then closed. "So… he's not ashamed of her. Just… the fact that it *meant something.*"

Gen gave a faint nod. "Exactly."

Senku stayed slouched, but at Gen speaking really started to notice that his hand was still pressed against his back. He could feel the warmth sinking in, and Senku wasn't quite sure what to make of it, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Can we not psychoanalyze every blink I made as a teenager?"

"You didn't blink," Gen said, too sweetly. "You *emoted* for lack of a better word," Then, with a little smirk that barely masked how fond it was: "And it was adorable."

Senku groaned under his breath, but the tips of his ears betrayed him, red just at the edges.

Ryusui chuckled under his breath. "Man's a genius in every field *except* owning his own feelings."

Including his growing feelings for Gen, Ryusui would be remiss to not notice. It was impressive

He stared into the tea, then added, “She let me make alcohol in the middle of an outbreak zone. Said it was contraband morale-boosting. I’d trade it for stuff the team needed—extra gloves, batteries, clean samples. And she’d just… smirk. Like she knew she should stop me but couldn’t be bothered if the science got done.”

Byakuya’s brow lifted slightly. “Sounds like she trusted you.”

Senku’s mouth twitched. Not quite a smile, “She did. I think.”

He leaned back slightly, exhaustion still clinging to his frame, but the words kept coming now. He needed this. Needed to say it out loud before it slipped into memory and lost its shape, “Rajiv was the one who got me looped into microbio stuff. He’d forget to eat unless someone threw a snack at him mid-sample. Luis pretended he hated everyone but always had spare water in his pack and a backup GPS just in case. But Ada…” His throat tightened. He forced the words anyway. “She called me *Kiddo*. Made me run PCRs until my arms ached. Yelled at NGO reps for lying about supply chains. Said I was *smart*—but I needed to be *useful*.”

Byakuya’s gaze was warm, but there was grief behind it too. “She sounds like someone who saw you for exactly who you are.”

Senku exhaled slowly from where he sat on the bench, fingers pressed against the corner of his mouth like he was physically trying to hold the words in before they escaped. The buzzing warmth of Gen's point of content still fresh on his mind, but it wasn't enough. His eyes were locked on the screen, but he wasn’t really seeing it anymore—just feeling it. The secondhand vulnerability of it all. His younger self, still reeling, still so *raw,* still opening up like someone had peeled the logic right off his skin.

“I can’t wait for this to switch back over to *you guys* already,” He muttered, voice low and sharp around the edges. “Seriously. Ten billion percent done with the group therapy arc of my teenage trauma.”

The comment got a soft sound from Gen—not quite a laugh, more like a hum of acknowledgment. But he didn’t let go of the contact he’d maintained with Senku’s back. Just a subtle, grounding pressure, like he knew that the joking tone was more about self-preservation than anything else.

Ada really *had* known him. Better than most. Better than almost anyone, if he was honest. Probably only Byakuya had ever matched that—understood how his brain ticked, how his silence was calculation, not distance. How his need for precision wasn’t about arrogance, but

necessity. Ada had seen through the noise and gotten it. *Gotten him.* With no babying, no condescension, no softened edges. Just expectation. Respect.

Even now, the memory of it stung in a way he didn't have the language for. He dragged a hand down his face and glared at the screen like *it* had personally betrayed him. "God. This is mortifying."

Now that the grief wasn't shielding him from the feeling of being so known down to his core it was running around him.

As Senku muttered his complaint, the room shifted with a collective exhale. Not relief—just… *anticipation.* Because they all knew what was coming next. The lens had been fixed on Senku for days now, dragging every unspoken crack of his past into the light. But eventually, the playback would move on. It had to. And when it did?

It would land on *them.*

Chrome scratched the back of his head, eyes narrowed at the screen. "Man, I didn't really think about it before, but… yeah. Not exactly excited for my own past to show up in front of everyone."

Ukyo's arms were crossed tighter than usual, mouth a thin line. "Same. I don't know what they'll show. Could be nothing. Could be… too much."

Kohaku said nothing, but her hands flexed slightly where they rested on her knees. Her eyes were still red, her jaw set. She wasn't afraid of being seen—but she didn't like the idea of being *watched* like this, through memories she hadn't even consented to share.

Francois remained composed, but their gaze flicked briefly toward the screen, then to Ryusui, calculating. "If my past is shown," They said softly, "I only hope it is done with context. Without it, even the most honorable decisions can be misread."

Ryusui looked unusually subdued for once, nodding. “Yeah. Context matters.” But his eyes were sharp, watching the others. He knew this wasn’t just about science or tragedy anymore. This was personal. Deeply personal.

And then there was Taiju.

He was still, visibly sweating.

Oh no.

Oh no no no.

My thoughts. My actual thoughts. And Yuzuriha is gonna hear them.

A memory of his most awkward internal panics—*her hands are so small, I can’t hold them she’ll notice how sweaty I am oh my god does she know I think she’s perfect—* flashed through his brain like a siren. His whole body locked up. Beside him, Yuzuriha was composed, watching the screen with a soft, steady sadness still lingering from the last scene. She hadn’t noticed Taiju’s spiral yet.

Which somehow made it worse.

Taiju swallowed hard and internally screamed.

Gen, meanwhile, watched all of them with quiet interest, the faintest flicker of a knowing smile curling at his mouth. He’d already had this realization days ago—*none of them* were getting through this clean. And after everything they’d just seen Senku go through?

They were all *very* aware of what this screen could do.

And what it might show next.

Senku didn’t reply right away. He stared down at the steam curling between his hands. Byakuya’s breath hitched softly, just for a second. He reached across the table and rested a hand on his son’s arm—not pushing, just grounding.

“Take your time, and when you're ready, take the next steps,” He said gently. “And Ada… wherever she is now, I think she’d be proud of that.”

Senku didn’t answer. He just nodded once, quietly.

The days blurred a little after that. Not in the dangerous way they had when he first returned—those endless hours where he couldn’t focus, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t *think* without seeing flashes of blood samples and panicked field workers and that goddamn beeping heart monitor slowing down like time itself was giving up. No. This was something different. He still didn’t have a project. No working models or full rebuilds scattered across the living room floor. No whiteboards layered in chemical equations. But he’d started *thinking* again. He ran probability trees in his head while brushing his teeth. Calculated the gravitational strain on satellite rotors while watching birds land on telephone wires. Practiced anaerobic fermentation with leftover kitchen yeast—not for any reason. Just because.

It felt like momentum.

He spent a few days rebuilding some of his old lab equipment in the shed behind their house. His hands moved slower than they used to. But they moved.

And his dad, to his credit, didn’t hover. Not after that night. He was just *there*—quiet, steady. Tea waiting. Dry jokes ready if needed. Senku had been grateful for that, even if he hadn’t said anything. And then, one afternoon, while scrubbing mineral build-up from a condenser coil, he realized that he didn’t *dread* the idea of school anymore. It wasn’t about curriculum. He knew the content already. Hell, he could teach it. But there was something else about being around Taiju, and Yuzuriha, and even those loud, nosy, clueless classmates of his. *Something grounding*. Something that reminded him he was still *here*.

Still human.

And maybe that was enough of a reason to go back.

The screen shifted quietly as the playback moved through a slow montage of Senku’s days following his return home—long, muted, and almost mundane. There was no dramatic music. No tearful speeches. Just the low hum of life continuing. Morning sunlight drifting across the table. Steam rising from a kettle. A pair of half-washed

beakers left to dry. Pages turning in an old chemistry journal that he barely seemed to read.

Chrome blinked at the screen, frowning slightly. "…Are we just watching him scrub glassware?"

Yuzuriha shook her head, still misty-eyed but soft. "It's not about what he's doing. It's about the fact that he's doing anything."

Gen didn't say anything at first. He was watching *closely*—the way Senku's hands didn't tremble now when he held the tools, the way he didn't flinch at the kettle's whistle anymore. No big swings of emotion. No breakdowns. Just *recovery.* Inch by inch.

"It's boring," Taiju whispered, like he didn't want to insult it. "But… like, the good kind of boring? The kind that feels safe?"

Ryusui snorted softly. "The kind that keeps a man sane."

Ukyo was silent, eyes following every shift of posture, every pause Senku took while staring at blueprints that would never be built. He could almost feel the way the silence would've pressed on his ears. The way you'd start *listening* too closely to your own thoughts. He watched Senku scrub mineral deposits from a coil and thought, *Yeah. This is exactly what healing looks like.*

And Francois—sharp-eyed as ever—nodded slightly. "There is an elegance to restraint. A return to order, even in the absence of purpose. That, too, is recovery."

Senku at some point over the hours had unraveled himself a little, Gen's contact had stopped, slide away as the grief had lessened. It left Senku feeling bereft, either of the contact, or just the hole that the quiet grief had left. He wasn't sure, it would take time probably, to realize.

He didn’t tell his dad right away. Didn’t announce it like some grand decision. He just showed up at the table that night, flipped his notebook open, and said, “I’ll need a ride to the school admin office this week. Might as well let them know I’m coming back.”

Byakuya didn’t say much.

Just gave him one of those proud-dad smiles that Senku pretended not to notice.

Then passed him the pepper shaker like it was any other night.

And that was perfect.

Gen watched the screen with something unreadable in his expression—too many thoughts behind his eyes to pin down just one. The way Senku’s voice had been flat but calm when he’d asked for a ride. The way Byakuya hadn’t made a big deal out of it. The way it felt so *normal*, so *casual*… and how clearly it wasn’t. He’d known this, sort of. They’d talked about it before. How Senku could’ve had a PhD before he hit twenty if he’d really wanted. How nothing about the high school curriculum even vaguely challenged him. Gen had always known it wasn’t about the *education.*

But now? Seeing this?

It was obvious.

This—this quiet kitchen. The steady rituals. The not-having-to-talk-about-it with Byakuya. The dumb hexagon board games. The vending machine lunches. The hallway conversations and half-baked experiments and Taiju’s too-loud voice echoing across the classroom—

This was what he stayed for.

His eyes drifted across the room to where Yuzuriha was dabbing at her cheeks, and Taiju was trying (and failing) not to sniffle too loudly behind his hands. Their presence in this moment—their unwavering, uncomplicated loyalty—wasn’t just a comfort. It was *stability.* It was a kind of love that didn’t demand anything but still gave everything.

Senku had needed that.

And he'd stayed where he could find it.

Gen's mouth curled, just faintly. Not quite a smirk. Not quite a smile.

"Figures," he murmured to himself. He didn't say it aloud, but part of him felt it deep in his chest—*You lucky, stubborn bastard. You really did find your constants.*

The front office wasn't ready for him.

"Oh, uh—wait. *I* remember you," one of the administrative aides stammered, flipping through a manila folder. "You're… the kid who tested out of everything?"

Senku stood silently in front of the desk, backpack slung lazily over one shoulder, posture straight despite the fact he looked like he hadn't slept well in a few weeks.

"Didn't you already qualify for—what was it—advanced placement credits at, uh…" She squinted at her notes. "Some university in Tokyo?"

"Multiple," Senku replied flatly.

"Oh." She blinked. "Then… why are you here?"

Senku shrugged. "For the lunch."

Chrome *snorted*, laughter bursting out of him like it caught him off guard. "*For the lunch?!*"

Taiju slapped his thigh, still bleary-eyed but wheezing. "That's our Senku!"

Yuzuriha giggled into her sleeve. "That's not even a lie. He *does* like cafeteria curry…"

Even Ukyo, subdued and thoughtful for most of the viewing, gave a soft huff of amusement, shaking his head.

Ryusui leaned back in his chair with an exaggerated stretch. “I must admit Senku, I am rather disappointed with your rational here. School lunches? How absurd! More power to you, I guess!"

Kohaku blinked, then grinned. “You people really are weird.”

The aide blinked again. He didn't elaborate. A few minutes later, the principal stepped out to greet him personally. He wore the same forced smile most adults did when trying to make sense of Senku’s presence. “Not that we’re unhappy to have you back, Ishigami-kun,” he said carefully, “but your academic record places you well beyond the high school curriculum. You could easily—”

“I’m not here for academics,” Senku interrupted.

The principal raised an eyebrow.

“I’m here because it’s where Taiju and Yuzuriha are.” Senku adjusted the strap on his shoulder. “If you need a more formal justification, feel free to put me on independent study. I won’t be a problem.”

And he wasn’t. Not really. Senku slipped back into the school rhythm like it had never left him. He didn’t fight the structure. Didn’t cause trouble. Didn’t correct the teachers even when he knew they were oversimplifying molecular diagrams. He sat in the back of the classroom, scrawling in his notebooks, quietly reading scientific journals on his tablet when he thought no one was looking.

Taiju barked a laugh, eyes still red but bright with warmth. “Huh, so that’s why you were so boring for a while! I figured maybe there wasn’t enough cool science stuff to keep you interested anymore again.”

Senku whipped his head around, scandalized. Pointing a finger at Taiju as he spoke, “Boring? You absolute human imbecile—you thought I was boring?!”

Gen cackled, folding over slightly where he sat. “What a curious reversal of fortune. Usually it's Senku-chan offending everyone. Intriguing to see the tables turn.”

“I was recovering from trauma, you dumbass,” Senku muttered darkly, arms crossing tight. “Not hibernating. And if you ever call me boring again, you oversized oaf, I’ll make you regret it. You don’t want to know what kind of science-based pranks I can invent even in a post-apocalyptic world. That electric gun we built? Child’s play.”

Yuzuriha, her eyes still puffy at the corners, giggled softly behind her hand. “He did rewire the vending machine that one time. He was definitely still Senku—just a little quieter.”

Ryusui leaned back with a grin, hand over his heart like he was making a grand proclamation. “I refuse to believe someone like Senku could ever be boring! If that were the case, I wouldn’t want him so much!”

Senku flashed a sharp, toothy grin. “Damn right,” he said, chin tipping up like that had never even been in question.

The others laughed. The air around them lightened.

But Gen?

Gen’s smile didn’t drop, but his brain definitely stuttered. *Back off, Capitalist. That’s my future investment in progress,* was the *first* thought—annoyed, reactive, irrational. He bit it down before it could land anywhere near his mouth. Instead, he leaned forward with an innocent sort of interest, resting his chin in one hand, elbow on his knee. “Ryusui, dearest—just out of curiosity…” His smile widened a fraction. “If you *had* to pick one of us in this room—purely hypothetically, of course—who would you want?”

Ryusui’s grin sharpened instantly. “Want in *what* way?”

“Oh, *any* way that counts,” Gen purred.

Chrome made a choking noise.

Ryusui looked over the group like he was assessing trade routes. “Hmm. Well, Kohaku could kill me with her pinky and that’s *incredibly* hot, but I think she’d use me for target practice within the week. Chrome’s too busy trying to understand carbonates. Ukyo always gives off an emotionally emotionally elusive vibe. Francois is… well, out of my league.”

Gen raised an eyebrow, tone all velvet and bait. “So that leaves two.”

Ryusui pointed between him and Senku. “The mentalist or the scientist.”

A beat passed.

Then he grinned wider. “Obviously it’s a tie. I’m greedy, remember?”

Gen groaned theatrically. “Of course it is.”

Senku just shrugged like *obviously*.

Yuzuriha wiped her eyes again, but this time it was because she was laughing.

Gen let out an exaggerated sigh and leaned back like he was unimpressed—but Senku caught the flash of something else beneath it. A flicker of challenge. A note of tension aimed not at Ryusui, but around him. *Mine,* the look seemed to say. Light. Playful. Barely there—but still.

Noted... Senku thought to himself, vaguly interested. He wanted to move, but held back the urge to shift in his seat or give anything away. But behind his eyes, the thoughts were already forming like rows of neatly labeled glass slides. Possessiveness. Emotional territorialism. Usually inefficient. Often rooted in fear, insecurity, or the need for validation. *Irrational*, by all clinical accounts.

But…

That wasn't all it was.

He'd studied this kind of behavior before. Some people found it flattering. Comforting, even—because it meant they were wanted. Valued. That someone cared enough to feel just a little protective. A little afraid of losing them. It wasn't always about control. Sometimes it was about connection. About *care,* poorly disguised as competition. He hadn't thought he was the type to respond to that.

And yet…

There was a flicker. Not unpleasant.

It wasn't the idea of being wanted that struck him—it was the quiet instinct behind it. Gen hadn't postured. Hadn't made a scene. He'd just dropped a little spike of tension in the air like a test balloon, watching to see how it landed.

It landed. Just not... In a way that Senku expected.

His pulse didn't jump. His breathing didn't change. But his brain—his relentless, calculating brain—took note of the response. Filed it under: *unexpected variables.*

This requires more data, he thought again, the echo louder this time.

He barely spoke unless it was to Taiju or Yuzuriha.

But his presence was *constant*.

The same teachers who'd once found him overwhelming now found him… quieter. Not withdrawn exactly—just subdued. Like he'd learned a new kind of silence

during the time he was away, one that had nothing to do with boredom. Yuzuriha noticed it first. Not in anything he said—but in the way he sat. Shoulders slightly more hunched. Hands still, fingers tapping against the table sometimes, like he was trying to keep himself grounded. Taiju noticed next. During lunch, when Senku sat with them like always but didn't launch into a rapid-fire breakdown of what he was working on. He just listened.

He still smirked occasionally. Still made the odd dry comment. But it was softer now. Faded at the edges.

Something had happened.

They didn't ask.

The room was quiet when the scene settled on that familiar classroom—modern Japan, clean desks, filtered light through the windows. And Senku, back in uniform. Back in a world that didn't match the one he'd survived. The contrast was stark. He looked like a kid again—because technically, he was. But now everyone watching knew what had been carved into him in those months away. What had been lost. What had been buried just beneath the surface.

Ukyo, eyes tracking the rhythm of Senku's tapping fingers, understood *too well* what that meant.

Francois folded their hands in their lap, gaze calm but sharp. They read posture the way others read words. It was in the curve of his shoulders. The way he turned slightly toward noise, but didn't flinch. The stillness that wasn't laziness, but control. Discipline. A young man reassembling himself piece by piece.

Yuzuriha's expression was gentle—understanding. Quiet pride and something softer in her chest. That kind of strength… it came at a cost.

Chrome shifted a little closer toward Kohaku, brow furrowed. "He's… different," he whispered.

Kohaku nodded, her arms folded but her eyes a little damp. "He came back, but not all of him did, similar to loosing someone from the village, since its small enough that we all know one another, if I had to guess."

Taiju—sweet, honest Taiju—had his hand pressed awkwardly against his mouth like he wasn't sure whether to cry or call out through the screen. "I didn't even know," he mumbled, voice cracking. "He was right there and I didn't even *know*."

It had been at least a month since Senku returned to Japan. The ache hadn't faded completely. Maybe it never would. But the sharpness had dulled at the edges. He could think about Uganda now without his chest knotting into something unbearable. He still caught himself glancing at his hands sometimes, half-expecting gloves and a sterile field to be waiting in front of him. But now, it was just a pencil. Or chalk. Or a table in the back of the classroom where Taiju was snoring against a workbook and Yuzuriha was carefully untangling embroidery thread. Normal. Mostly.

That evening, when the house was quiet and Byakuya had already gone to bed, Senku sat at his desk with the overhead light casting soft shadows against the walls. His laptop screen flickered. Open tabs showed research articles, some new field work in Central Africa, recent grants distributed to NGO programs. The usual. Except this time, his cursor hovered over the "compose message" button in his email.

He stared at it for a long moment. Then clicked.

To: *Rajiv Patel*
Subject: *Re: Still Alive, Somehow*

Hey.

It's been a while.

Japan's too clean. I think my body rejected the water the first three days. My brain feels weird without field noise. Everything here is too organized. I can't even bribe the lunch lady for better protein.

I finished the rough model you sketched up in that notebook you forgot. It works, but the margins are a nightmare—your code is as ugly as your handwriting.

Let me know if you want the file. I backed it up.

- *Senku*
  p.s. Luis still hoarding the good coffee?

p.p.s. I miss you guys.

No one cried this time.

No one sniffled or reached for tissues.

They just… smiled.

Yuzuriha let out a soft breath and nudged Taiju's arm. "He did it," she whispered, eyes shining—but not with tears this time. "He reached out."

Taiju nodded, a wide, proud grin blooming across his face. "Yeah. Yeah, he *did*. That's our Senku!"

Ryusui crossed his arms and nodded with rare, quiet approval. "Now *that's* how you return from the ashes. Pick up the threads, stitch them together, and make something stronger. I'd expect nothing less. I hope that one day we can also find Rajiv and Luis so that I can have them as well!"

Kohaku smiled softly, almost to herself. "It's good to see. After everything he went through… it's good."

Even Ukyo's shoulders had relaxed. He didn't say anything, but his expression said enough.

Francois gave the faintest nod. "A most important step forward."

Gen, still watching Senku from the corner of his eye, let himself grin—wide this time. No teasing, no mischief. Just genuine joy.

"Look at you," he said quietly, more to Senku than anyone else. "Making contact. Maintaining bonds. That's what we call textbook emotional growth."

"Mentalist..." Senku rolled his eyes, "Don't be ridiculous."

As if the resident psychologist didn't know enough about him at this point to know about what felt like his all too large emotional range.

He hit send before he could think too hard about it. Then, after a beat, he opened a second tab.

To: *Luis Moretti*
Subject: *Thought You'd Want to Know*

We got some early figures from that last outbreak you helped lock down. Containment held. Less than 20 confirmed transmissions post-field. You did good work. Just thought you should hear that from someone who was there. I hope you're still yelling at interns and terrifying customs officers in five languages.

- *Senku*

It wasn't much. But it was *something*. He leaned back in his chair and exhaled slowly. No one had replied yet. Probably wouldn't until tomorrow, given the time difference. But that didn't matter. He'd reached out. He'd remembered that not all connection had to come with loss. And that maybe—just maybe—he wasn't alone in missing that strange little crew.

Not entirely.

Taiju sat up fast—too fast—nearly knocking over the empty snack bowl beside him. His expression was pinched, determined, and *stern*, which wasn't a look anyone was used to seeing from him. He turned on Senku with both hands planted firmly on his knees like a parent about to deliver a life lesson.

"You *better* not think this is the end of it," Taiju said, voice sharp with barely-contained emotion. "I mean it, Senku."

Senku blinked. "Huh?"

“We’re gonna find them,” Taiju insisted, scooting closer and getting right in Senku’s space like it was 100 B.C. and no one had ever heard of personal boundaries. “Luis. Rajiv. We’re gonna find them. When we figure out where people are petrified—when we unlock whatever science or map or weird ancient tech it takes to track them down—we’re gonna *revive* them.”

He jabbed a finger at Senku’s chest, eyes bright and serious. “And *you’re* gonna do the math, and the science, and the tracking *thingies*—and we’re gonna get them *back*. Got it?”

Senku just sat there, blinking at him.

Totally dumbfounded.

There was something in his expression that looked almost like awe—like some deep, quiet part of him hadn’t even *dared* to imagine that far ahead. Not really. Not like *this*. Not like having *Taiju*, his relentless, impossibly loyal best friend, speak the idea aloud like it was already decided.

Like it was *real*.

“…Tch,” Senku muttered at last, eyes darting sideways as if he couldn’t quite look at Taiju directly. “You make it sound like it’s easy.”

“It’s not easy,” Taiju said fiercely. “But we’re gonna do it anyway.”

There was a pause.

Then Gen let out a breath that was almost a laugh. “Well,” he murmured, “I guess we’re adding ‘miracle revival rescue mission’ to the Kingdom of Science’s to-do list.”

"…Tch. You idiots," Senku muttered. But there was no heat behind it. Only gratitude.

Byakuya padded softly into the room, arms crossed over his chest, watching the way the soft blue light from Senku's laptop spilled over the boy's face. He didn't say anything at first. Just stood there for a moment, leaning against the doorframe, gaze quietly taking in the signs—the faint circles under Senku's eyes finally starting to fade, the stillness in his posture less rigid than it had been weeks ago. His hands weren't clenched. His shoulders weren't tight with tension.

He wasn't okay, not yet. But he wasn't drowning anymore either.

"…So," Byakuya finally said, his voice casual. "Have you figured out how to build a telescope that can detect alien microbes from your high school science lab yet, or are we still pretending to be normal?"

Senku didn't look up from his screen. "Not enough reflective surface. the pursuit of science is normal, some people just like to get in the way of progress."

Byakuya snorted. "Fair enough."

He wandered in a little farther, peering over Senku's shoulder. The email tab was still open, though Senku had minimized the window. His fingers hovered over the mouse, idle. The screen behind it was code—dense, ugly formatting. Byakuya didn't comment on the emails. He didn't have to. Instead, he tapped lightly on the back of Senku's chair. "I'm going to make dinner. You want that bean thing you were weirdly into before you left, or should I attempt something actually edible?"

Senku's lips twitched faintly. "I was weirdly into? Are you seriously putting that on me old man?"

"I was waiting for you to demand something else but you never did!" Byakuya exclaimed teasingly, "You were supposed to rebel and demand pizza. I was prepared for pizza."

Kohaku groaned from her seat, rolling her eyes. "That's such a *Gen* thing to do," She muttered.

Gen perked up immediately, ever smug. "I don't know whether to be insulted or flattered."

"More insulted," Kohaku said flatly, crossing her arms. "But I guess a little bit of both."

“Now, now,” Gen purred, leaning back with his usual dramatics, “I’d *never* deprive Senku of proper nutrition *just* to make a point.”

Ryusui raised an eyebrow. “You absolutely would.”

Gen sighed dramatically, dragging his fingers down his face like the sheer *longing* in his soul might physically manifest. “Look, I’d love to say I’m doing this out of romantic devotion or the thrill of the scientific challenge—but let’s be real here.” He leaned forward, elbows on knees, eyes serious. “I, like every other sensible modern human in this room, would absolutely kill for pizza right now.”

Yuzuriha gave a little snort, still sniffling but clearly amused. “Hard same.”

“Francois?” Gen prompted, tilting his head.

Francois folded their arms. “While I do not condone violence, I will admit: pizza would be most welcome.”

Ryusui grinned wide. “Francois, darling, that was practically a war cry.”

Kohaku looked around, confused. “What’s pizza again?”

Taiju slammed his hands down on his knees, expression blazing with passion. “Okay! Operation Pizza begins *now!*”

Senku groaned softly. “Oh god. You’re going to give it a name, aren’t you.”

“Absolutely!” Taiju declared. “We’ll collect all the ingredients, build whatever tools you need, and figure out how to make the dough. You figure out ovens or whatever—”

“I already built an oven, you oversized—”

“—and Gen, you can be in charge of toppings. You’ve got good taste!”

Gen looked genuinely touched. “Flattery *and* responsibility? I’m honored.”

Senku just dropped his head into his hands.

Taiju raised one fist to the sky, beaming. “We’re getting pizza if it kills us!”

Senku, muffled: “It might.”

He turned dramatically, eyes locking onto Francois with a hopeful gleam. “And no good plan starts without the finest chef in the world.”

Francois met Taiju's gaze calmly, expression unreadable for a beat. Then they gave a small, perfectly measured sigh—like someone steeling themselves for the noble duty of entertaining children. “A butler does not turn down a genuine request,” They said smoothly. “Even less so when it comes from the collective will of their nation.”

“Francois,” Ryusui said, voice rich with pride, “You are magnificent.”

Francois offered a small bow, already switching mental gears into logistics. “However. If you expect a *true* pizza—not a facsimile, not a bread disc with apologies—we will require certain things.”

Senku, head still in his hands, muttered, “Here we go.”

Francois, ever the model of grace under pressure, folded their arms behind their back and offered a small, professional nod. “We have flour. We have salt. We even have yeast active from our last batch of bread, and enough experience to ferment proper dough. But if we’re aiming for something worthy of the name ‘pizza,’ we’ll require three additional components.”

They turned to Senku with practiced poise. “A viable cooking oil, a tomato base—and some form of cheese. Goat cheese, I presume, unless you’ve hidden a cow somewhere.”

Senku leaned back with a hum, tapping two fingers against his knee. “Tch. No cows, and we’re not building a dairy barn just for mozzarella. Goat cheese it is.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait, is goat cheese okay on this pizza thing? You made it sound like it's not normal.”

Senku tilted his head, already mid-mental calculation. “Goat milk has higher fat and protein content than cow’s milk, which actually makes it *easier* to curdle and ferment in small batches. Texture’s a little softer, more crumbly if we don’t press it—but if we add heat slowly and blend with something acidic, it’ll melt enough to work.”

Gen, perched casually nearby, raised an eyebrow. “So what you’re saying is—it’s possible. But it won’t taste exactly like a Tokyo corner shop slice?”

Senku smirked, toothy and unapologetic. “Welcome to the Stone World, mentalist.”

Yuzuriha leaned forward slightly. “What about the sauce? Do tomatoes even grow wild around here?”

Senku clicked his tongue. “Not the kind we’re used to. Japan doesn’t have *native* tomato species that match what grows in Europe or the Americas. But—there *are* wild varieties of *Solanum* species in Asia. The trick is finding one with low enough alkaloid concentration and enough pulp to make a reduction that won’t taste like overboiled grass.”

Ryusui looked intrigued. “Sounds like a treasure hunt.”

“Exactly,” Senku nodded. “We’ll scout riverbeds and abandoned farmlands. With a few lucky crossbreeds, we could maybe start a viable crop.”

“And the oil?” Francois asked.

Senku held up a hand, already ticking off options. “Sesame is our best bet. Indigenous to parts of Asia, and we’ve seen signs of wild growth inland. High fat yield. Flavor’s strong, but if we cold-press and clarify it, we’ll get a clean enough oil base for cooking.”

Francois nodded with approval. “Acceptable.”

Gen stretched lazily, eyes sparkling. “So to summarize—we’re making a pizza with goat cheese, stone-age tomato sauce, and sesame oil crust. I would sell my *soul* for that right now.”

“I’d sell *yours* too,” Ryusui added brightly, clapping a hand on Gen’s shoulder.

Senku rolled his eyes, "That's not yours to sell, Capitalist."

"Is it yours, Senku?" Ryusui asked, his tone edging on clever, hinting at a relationship that Senku had told himself many times he was not willing to start. Senku could feel his eye twitch, but he didn't answer, just let it stand in the air. Several of their friends looked between them with curiosity, Chrome getting an evil look in his eye that spelled that he was wanting to plan something, and Senku really didn't want anything to do with that. Damned Mentalist.

Said Mentalist, who was doing the opposite of helping, and was instead covering up a smile with a slim finger as if that hid the genuine crinkle around his eye. Weak, for such

a good actor.

> “Don't use me as an excuse to try and get around your diet, old man. I should have known there was something weird going on.”
>
> “Ahhhh I still remember the good old days. You were a tiny dictator when they didn’t measure the sauce ratio right on your pizza.”
>
> “I grew out of that.”
>
> Byakuya grinned. “You’re allowed to still be annoying, you know. You’re only sixteen.”
>
> Senku clicked his tongue. “I must be, considering you seem to manage it just fine at your age.”
>
> Byakuya started to head for the door, but paused at the threshold. He turned, one hand still resting on the frame. His voice was softer this time, gentler. “By the way. Those emails you sent?They already replied. Both of them. Came in while I was bothering you with nostalgic nonsense.” His smile didn’t quite fade, but it softened. “Didn’t even take thirty minutes, huh? They must really care about you.”
>
> Senku blinked. For a second, he didn’t say anything. Just stared at the empty space where the laptop screen was hidden, as if trying to process that. Then, quietly:
>
> “…Yeah.”

Senku blinked slowly at the screen. Byakuya’s timing had been perfect. The gentle ribbing, the light nostalgia, the offhanded distraction about pizza ratios and age—every word just calibrated enough to pull focus, to keep him from fixating on the emotional weight of the emails. It hadn’t felt like strategy in the moment, but watching it now, distanced by years and the glow of the playback, Senku could see it for what it was.

A well-timed emotional deflection. Seamless. Protective. Ridiculously effective.

And, unfortunately, familiar.

Senku stiffened in his seat.

…No.

He *was not* thinking what he thought he was thinking, not again. No way was there this many signs and moments where his old man... His eyes flicked sideways—just for a second—toward Gen, still seated next to him. He hadn't said anything during this scene—hadn't needed to. That was the problem. *hat* was what reminded Senku of— His internal monologue tripped over itself.

Oh no.

Oh no.

No. Nope. Not going there.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. Focused on the screen. Did not think about the term *positive Oedipal transference dynamics* or the multiple documented studies on people subconsciously drawn to traits reminiscent of their primary caregivers. He absolutely, categorically *refused* to apply that to *this*.

Still—

His brain, *damn it*, wouldn't let it go.

Was *that* why he was reacting the way he was to Gen's support? The quiet intuition, the way Gen always seemed to *know* what Senku needed before he said it—was that why it felt so… safe? Familiar? Senku felt his stomach knot. *No, no, no.* He was not going to spiral over *attachment theory* while sitting on a couch next to the subject of the spiral. A flicker of horror crossed his face for a microsecond before he forced it neutral again. He needed to talk to someone about this. Preferably not Gen. *Definitely* not Gen. Maybe Chrome. Or Ukyo. Or—actually, no, Ukyo would hear his pulse shift and call him out instantly. And Chrome would just make a weird face and ask if it had to do with hormone signaling.

Senku buried his face in his hand.

He was going to need to design a distraction protocol for himself next time. Something with beakers. Or combustion.

Just—anything but *this*.

Byakuya nodded once, like that was all he needed to hear. Then he disappeared into the kitchen, the sound of cupboards opening and pots shifting filling the silence behind him. Senku sat still for a while longer. Then he pulled the emails back up. Senku stared at the blinking notification on his screen.

1 Unread Message – From: Rajiv Patel

You're late, Senkuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu— Disappeared for a MONTH and your first email is "hey"?

Rude.

I could have died. You don't know. I could've been eaten by a monkey with a vengeance complex. But no, really—glad to hear from you. We're still scrubbing out your model from the water-testing rig. Your chemical calibration? Still working. Told this UN-funded group in from New York that a Japanese teen built it. They didn't believe me. It made my entire week. I'm still on samples most days, but they've pulled me into more public talks lately. Your name came up at one of the youth-outreach events. I said you were a menace, and then showed them your graphs. They were very impressed. You're officially "Rajiv's favorite genius kid who tried to distill motor oil."

It's not the same without the old team. The new kids they moved me too don't argue with me about protein markers. Losers.

Hope Japan's treating you okay. I know it's gotta be a weird transition back. But seriously—stay in touch. We're still your people, kid.

Keep going.

Rajiv
P.S. I never gave your chair to anyone. It's got your name on it now. Literally. Sharpie. Try to sue me.

Senku didn't laugh—but something in his chest shifted. The mental image of Rajiv yelling at students while gesturing wildly at his graphs—and a chair marked up in

thick permanent marker—was absurd and warm in equal measure. His fingers hovered over the keyboard, then dropped. He didn't write back. Not yet.

He just saved the message.

Then Chrome let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "Man… I like that guy."

Yuzuriha smiled, eyes still faintly red-rimmed but shining with something gentler now. "That's the kind of email you hold onto forever."

Taiju sniffled—again—but it wasn't sad this time. "He didn't give the chair away!" he said, voice cracking just a little. "That's—Senku, did you hear that?! He *Sharpied* your name on it!"

Gen made a soft noise under his breath—something between a chuckle and a sigh. "And *I* thought I was dramatic." But his voice was fond. Thoughtful. "He knows Senku wouldn't have said anything emotional back. So he wrapped it in sarcasm and monkey jokes. That's good strategy."

Kohaku tilted her head. "Is that... friendship language?"

Gen smiled faintly. "That's *scientist friendship language*."

Francois folded their hands neatly. "It's efficient," they said. "Affection and reassurance conveyed with just enough absurdity to be palatable. Very well done."

1 Unread Message – From: Luis Moretti

Took you long enough.

You heard about the restructuring—they shifted a bunch of ops south, but we've still got eyes in the zone. I got your materials sent over to Geneva. You'll probably

get a follow-up eventually. Didn't attach your name to the motor oil distillation notes, though. Thought you might want plausible deniability.

They kept me and Rajiv together. He's still loud. Still stubborn. Still thinks every bug bite is going to give him dengue. Tell him I said so. Okoye's notes are being preserved. Officially archived through two orgs. You don't need to worry about that. I already fought that fight. You were good out here. And you were right. About the filtration rig. About the projections. About the alcohol, even. You read people better than most do at twice your age.

Everyone here saw it.

Keep building.
She'd hate it if you didn't.

—Luis

Gen was the first to breathe. "That's… a damn good letter," he said, voice low. Thoughtful. "Every word of it is doing three different jobs at once."

Chrome nodded slowly. "He's like, cool in a scary way. You can tell he's the kind of guy who doesn't talk much but *gets stuff done.*"

Yuzuriha wiped under one eye, though she wasn't really crying anymore. "He already fought that fight," She repeated quietly. "So Senku wouldn't have to."

Taiju let out a shaky breath—part relief, part lingering emotion. "That's the kind of person you want on your team. Like, forever."

"Haha! I like the way you think, Taiju!"

Ukyo's gaze stayed on the screen, eyes sharp. "He knew what would matter. Gave Senku credit for the hard stuff, shielded him from the messy parts, and didn't try to *say* anything emotional—but he said it anyway."

Francois tilted their head, visibly impressed. “An excellent communicator,” they observed. “Pragmatic. But intentional. Every line had meaning. I rather think I would get along with him the best out of all the people who were on that particular team. I admire him quite a bit."

Even Ryusui, for once, didn’t crack a grin, pushed his earlier amusement with Taiju to the side. He crossed his arms loosely and murmured, “A soldier’s kind of loyalty. Quiet, blunt, and absolute. I respect that.”

Senku blinked once.

Then again.

Everyone here saw it.

He didn’t know what to do with that. Not really. He leaned back slowly, arms crossing over his chest as he stared at the screen. His throat felt tight. His eyes stung in a way that he could probably blame on sleep deprivation. Probably. He muttered under his breath. “Bastards.”

There was no venom in it. Senku saved both emails into a new folder: **Important.** Then sat there for a long time, thinking. The chair creaked slightly as he shifted, eyes still on the words: *Keep building.*

Eventually, he got up—halfheartedly brushing the dust off his hoodie—and walked out of the room. He didn’t say anything to his dad as he passed. But Byakuya smiled anyway. Because Senku's eyes, while tired, weren’t quite as clouded as they had been the day before.

It was the sound of Gen’s exhale that broke the moment first. A quiet, almost unnoticeable breath—like the release of tension he hadn’t realized he’d been holding for *hours.* He glanced sideways at Senku, who was still watching the screen even though it had faded to black. His arms were crossed, body stiff, but something in his posture had *shifted*. The jagged edges weren’t gone, but they’d softened. Eased.

Chrome rubbed his sleeve across his face. “Didn’t sound like he meant it when he called them bastards.”

“He didn’t,” Yuzuriha said softly, her voice warm.

“Mm,” Gen hummed. “That was affection. Wrapped in barbed wire, but still affection.”

Gen couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped him at that. “He’ll probably print it out and laminate it. The hidden softy that he is!"

Francois, hands folded neatly, inclined their head. “As he should. It is always wise to preserve what is truly meaningful.”

A few months later

“YOU BIG OAF—WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO?!”

Senku’s voice echoed across the schoolyard, sharp and exasperated. A small cloud of white smoke puffed out from behind the storage shed, followed by a loud *sputter* and the unmistakable *thunk* of something toppling over.

Taiju peeked his head out, covered in soot, grinning sheepishly. “Uh… surprise?”

Senku stomped toward him, lab coat flaring out behind him like a storm front. “You tried to *build a combustion engine* out of scrap metal and *one* YouTube video?! You don’t even know what an exhaust valve *is!*”

Taiju scratched the back of his head. “But I thought it’d be a cool gift for you!”

Chrome’s eyes went *wide.* “WOAH. Maybe Taiju should be on the science team!”

Senku wheeled on him so fast it was almost a blur. “Absolutely not.”

Chrome flinched. “Wha—wait, what? He built something that could *turn on!* That’s kinda cool, right?”

“*With premade parts,*” Senku snapped, waving a finger through the air to exemplify what a horrible idea that was, “And even *with* those, he almost turned it into a flaming projectile!”

“I followed a video!” Taiju insisted from the ground, still grinning.

Senku pointed a dramatic finger at him. “Anyone can follow a tutorial, you gorilla! But somehow, *you* still managed to mess it up so catastrophically that the motor reverse-fired! You reversed the polarity on the capacitor line. The. *Capacitor line.* Do you know how hard it is to *accidentally* reverse one of those?!”

Taiju blinked, visibly running out of ideas. “...It made a *really* satisfying pop?”

“You blew a hole through the workbench.”

Chrome snorted. “Okay, that’s kinda impressive.”

“No,” Senku barked, jabbing a thumb at his own temple, “What’s impressive is that *this* —this walking hazard zone—managed to not take us all out with him.”

Gen, lounging nearby with one leg crossed over the other, chuckled. “Honestly, I think it’s sweet. Trying to cheer you up with science like that, even if it didn't end up working out was quite nice of him. Very on brand for Taiju.”

Yuzuriha giggled. “He just wanted to help.”

Senku grumbled and crossed his arms, “Help me by never touching science equipment again, other than to lug it when I request you to. That’d be a gift.”

“Got it!” Taiju beamed, utterly unbothered. “No more engines. Just… hugs?”

“No hugs either!” Senku barked, backing up agianst the chair a little more instinctively, "I thought you got that out of your system earlier!"

“It’s a miracle you still have eyebrows!”

“Wait, do I?” Taiju patted his face in mild panic.

Yuzuriha giggled from where she sat nearby on the bench, needle in hand as she stitched together some prototype fabric design. “You know, it’s kind of nice hearing this again.”

Senku scowled, crouching down beside the smoldering wreckage to assess just how badly the lawn had been singed. He wore a lab coat that had WHO stitching on it a lot now, rather than the old one that he used to use. This one seemed oddly fitting, “What’s nice about a walking fire hazard?”

She just smiled softly. “You. Being like this. It means you’re okay again.”

Senku paused, gaze flicking toward her. Then, almost grudgingly, he muttered, “Tch. Of course I’m okay. I’ve got to live long enough to make humanity a spacefaring civilization.”

“Ah—there it is,” she said with a grin.

Taiju sat on the ground, watching them both with a goofy smile. “It’s true though. You’re kinda like... back to normal. Only, like, super-smart adult normal. It’s weird.”

Senku snorted. “I’ve *always* been super-smart, idiot.”

Yuzuriha let out a shaky giggle, wiping her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “I forgot how much I missed hearing that tone from him.” She sniffled, but her smile was bright. “It’s so *him*.”

Taiju nodded, still wiping at the corners of his eyes too. “That’s my best friend. Still a jerk. But also… *still here*.”

Gen leaned forward, elbows on his knees, a rare softness in his expression. “The WHO coat really *does* suit him. It’s the right kind of symbolism. He didn’t leave that version of himself behind—he just… integrated it.”

“Yeah,” Ukyo murmured. “He’s still carrying it. But it’s not crushing him anymore.”

Even Ryusui—normally irreverent—sat forward slightly, nodding with the kind of proud, knowing smirk one reserves for a comrade who's clawed their way through hell and come out the other side. "He really does always keep moving forward. A true inspiration!"

There was a long pause, and then Senku still watching the playback in silence, scoffed lightly under his breath, "Of course I'm okay. You think I'd let some brain chemicals win?"

Gen glanced sideways at him, not even pretending to hide the fondness in his expression. "No, Senku-chan. You'd *negotiate* with them until they gave up."

Senku didn't reply, but a flicker of something—amusement, pride, maybe even gratitude—passed behind his eyes. And he didn't lean away from Gen when their arms brushed again. Not even a little.

Yuzuriha let her gaze drift sideways, taking in the silhouette of Senku beside Gen. The dress-coat thing he wore had seen better days—creased from wear, a little frayed at the edges, too long in places, a poor blend of costume and practicality. It might be time... Senku deserved to feel more himself. He did seem to like what he was wearing, but soemthing didn't sit right. Not quite *him.*

Her fingers twitched.

She'd been meaning to do it for days—take it, adjust it, tailor something better. Something sleeker, still dramatic enough to fit Senku's terrible flair for theatrical science, but closer to an actual lab coat. Something that said: *this is a scientist who rebuilt civilization.* Something that would move when he did. Her mind buzzed as the ideas took shape. Darker fabric, maybe—something less prone to dust stains. Reinforced stitching along the shoulders. Tapered fit, so it wouldn't billow when he crouched down to work. She could keep the double collar, if she restructured it right. Functional pockets were a given. Maybe a hidden zipper if she could get away with it—because knowing Senku, he'd stuff it full of god-knows-what if it held.

He wouldn't notice if she took it overnight. He was too tired, too distracted. She'd just need a moment, right after they wrapped for the night.

Yuzuriha tucked her thoughts away with a quiet smile, already plotting out materials in her head.

> "Yeah, but now you don't look like you're carrying the end of the world on your back."
>
> For a second, Senku didn't say anything.
>
> Then he stood, brushing off his hands, and shoved them into his pockets with a sigh. "That's because I realized something."
>
> Taiju blinked. "What?"
>
> Senku glanced at the two of them—one still covered in soot, the other quietly threading fabric like it mattered more than gold, a grin flashed in their direction, "That no matter what happens in life, Taiju will always be around to do some stupid shit that I will have to be around to stop from blowing up."

"Hey!! I *try* to be helpful!"

Yuzuriha nearly doubled over, hands flying to cover her mouth as a delighted giggle slipped out. "Oh my god, Senku—!"

Chrome wheezed. "He *really* set that up like it was gonna be something serious!"

"Classic Senku," Gen said with a hand over his heart, dramatically swooning into Ukyo's shoulder. "Had us all thinking he was about to drop some profound emotional truth and then—*bam!* Taiju slander."

Ryusui leaned back, hands behind his head, grinning. "Honestly? Perfect delivery. Ten billion points for timing."

Even Francois cracked a small, elegant smile. “I must admit, the bait-and-switch was artful.”

Ukyo’s shoulders shook with a quiet laugh. “To be fair… he’s not wrong.”

Taiju pouted through the laughter, but there wasn’t an ounce of heat behind it. “Come on! I didn’t *try* to blow anything up!”

“You *never try,*” Senku deadpanned. “That’s the problem.”

He didn’t bother hiding the smirk tugging at the edge of his mouth now—not around these people. The laughter, the banter, the warmth threading through the space between them—it was the kind of atmosphere that made the ache in his chest feel like something manageable. Something human.

It was good.

It was enough.

He didn’t wait for a response. Just turned and walked back toward the school building, muttering to himself about cleaning supplies and chemical residue.

Yuzuriha and Taiju shared a look.

Behind them, the engine sparked again.

“Taiju!” Senku barked from inside. “*Turn that thing off before it kills someone!*”

“Coming!!”

And with that, the chaos resumed. But it was a softer kind of chaos now—familiar, loud, a little stupid—and exactly what Senku needed.

Yuzuriha beamed.

“That’s *exactly* what I was hoping for,” she whispered, practically bouncing on her toes. “Did you hear that? ‘Exactly what he needed.’ We *nailed* it.”

Taiju puffed up like a proud puppy, rubbing the back of his neck with a bashful grin. “I mean, I didn’t *mean* to almost blow up the lawn again, but hey! If it helped…”

“You *did* help,” Yuzuriha insisted, elbowing him gently. “That’s the important part.”

“Ten billion percent," Gen murmured from a few feet away, watching the two with an amused smile. “Smug friendship: activated.”

Yuzuriha raised her chin playfully. “You’re just jealous we got him to smile before *you* did.”

Gen gasped, all mock outrage and fluttered fingers. He didn't even think that was true, he was pretty sure that he had gotten the current Senku to smile at LEAST once before those two did while watching this, but he could pretend otherwise, “Unbelievable! Slandered by a seamstress.”

“Beloved seamstress,” Yuzuriha corrected, then stuck out her tongue.

Taiju laughed, bright and easy. “Let’s be real, though—none of this would’ve worked if it wasn’t *Senku.* He’s tough. Just needed a little… encouragement.”

They all turned toward the school building, where Senku’s grumbling could still be faintly heard from inside. Something about “carbon scoring” and “complete combustion, my ass.”

Once those two turned away, Senku leaned into Gen's personal space a little, and it felt weirdly natural, and he didn't want to think about that right now. Instead he spoke in a

hushed tone, "Are you sure we can't just use my plan for them and get this over with?"

Gen rolled his eyes. Not really the response that Senku wanted.

Something interesting happened the next Sunday morning. Senku was out walking alone—something he'd started doing more often lately. His classmates were still asleep, the air was crisp, and the streets were mostly empty. A quiet sort of peace.

And then he saw it.

A sparrow. Perfectly still. Too still. Lying on the sidewalk like a fossil in plain sight, wings frozen mid-flutter, its body hard and cold and heavy in his hand. His brow furrowed. Something wasn't right. Another bird nearby. And another. He crouched down, collecting the bodies one by one, examining them carefully. No blood. No wounds. But their eyes were wide open, bodies frozen in a way that didn't match rigor mortis. They weren't dead, not in the way animals usually died.

It was as if—

His breath caught.

It was as if they'd *turned to stone.*

Senku's eyes remained fixed on the screen, but his thoughts drifted somewhere far beneath the surface. He *had* acted.He'd noticed the anomalies early. Cross-referenced sparrow migration patterns with weather maps and electromagnetic interference. He'd hacked into closed-loop aviation data, sent encrypted messages to Xeno about unexplained aerial drop-offs of the sparrows and localized collapses in bird populations. There had been signs. Clear, escalating signs.

He'd made charts. Timelines. Projections.

But still…

Still, he hadn't made the leap.

He hadn’t guessed it would be *them* next. Humanity. The entire species.

Because why would he? Birds were small. Sensitive. Flight required precision—of course they were early indicators. But the jump to a full-body petrification agent, something capable of molecular suspension without destruction, something that could cross continents in hours and ignore every known defense? Even for him, it had felt like fiction. Like *too much*.

“I should’ve seen it,” He muttered under his breath, so low it was almost silent.

Gen heard it anyway. His hand hesitantly was placed back to the scientists back, displaying his support in a way that he was now mostly sure Senku didn't hate—but he didn’t speak.

Senku’s jaw clenched. A real scientist would probably be disappointed in him for his lack of action. He *had* seen parts of it. He’d *acted* on parts of it. But the one answer he hadn’t chased—the one that might’ve mattered most—was *how to undo it*. How to unpetrify the world. How to stop it before it took *everyone*.

Because some part of him… just hadn’t believed it could.

The leap was too illogical. Too large.

But now?

Now he *knew* better.

And he would never make the mistake of underestimating the seemingly impossible again.

For a moment, Senku didn’t move. Then, slowly, he pressed his fingers together in front of his mouth—the same gesture he’d practiced in silence a hundred times, taught by a woman whose brilliance still echoed in his mind. Dr. Ada Okoye. *Focus. Shut out the noise. Move the thoughts forward.* The world dulled around him. His brain lit up. Mineral composition. Biostructural integrity. Trace anomalies in cell rigidity. Avian metabolic variance. Vector mapping. Environmental consistency. Possibilities spiraling out and folding back in on themselves like gears turning inside a puzzle box.

Theories layered on top of theories.

Something happened here. Something massive. Something science couldn't explain... Yet.

He didn’t feel fear.

He felt alive.

More alive than he’d felt in months. When he finally lowered his hands, the sound of wind returned. Leaves rustled. A car passed in the distance. Senku looked down at his own fingers—the ones still resting in that familiar posture—and smiled. His first genuine smile in a long, long time.

"Looks like I just found the next big mystery," he murmured. “This is exhilarating."

Ukyo exhaled softly, eyes still on the screen. “That’s our Senku,” he murmured.

Chrome nodded slowly, awe and admiration blending in his expression. “He doesn’t flinch away from it. Not even now.”

“Of course not,” Gen said, tone quiet but proud. “The more dangerous it gets, the more *interesting* it is to him.”

Ryusui grinned faintly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “The face of danger is just another lab for him. Another puzzle to crack.”

Gen stretched his arms overhead with a dramatic sigh, fingers cracking as he glanced around at the crew. “Alright,” He said, voice warm but edged with finality. “I think that’s a wrap for tonight, folks.”

He gestured loosely toward the still-dim screen, the faint glow now more ambient than urgent. “That’s probably the end of this little... well, for lack of a better term, *arc*. And frankly? It’s a good place to cut it. We’ve all had enough tears to qualify for some sort of emotional water filtration project.”

There were a few quiet chuckles, soft nods. Everyone looked tired, but it was a different kind of tired now. Worn out, yes—but not shattered. Senku gave a noncommittal grunt of agreement, pushing himself to his feet. “Yeah. We’re not going to get much more data tonight.” He dusted off his coat, already turning toward the corridor leading to the science lab—the one that, somewhere along the way, had become *his* and *Gen’s* room.

Well, he was the one to suggest to Gen that they put a bunk bed in there, if he was being honest. He tried not to think too much about it.

(When had that happened? When had *that* just become normal?)

Before either of them could leave, Ukyo stepped forward. “Senku.”

Senku blinked, surprised by the interruption. Ukyo rarely initiated conversations unless there was a clear purpose. He tilted his head slightly. “Yeah?”

Ukyo nodded once, hands in his pockets. “Do you mind if we talk? Just a little. Up front.”

Gen raised a brow but didn’t pry. “I’ll keep the lab warm,” he said breezily, before sauntering off with an exaggerated little sway that was only half for show.

Senku watched him go, then turned back to Ukyo. “Alright. Let’s walk.”

The two of them made their way toward the bow of the ship, the sounds of the others slowly fading behind them. It was quieter out here. Just the soft slap of water against the hull, the creak of wood, and the muted hum of nighttime energy.

Senku slid his hands into his pockets, casting a sidelong glance at Ukyo. “So. What’s on your mind?”

Ukyo stood with his arms loosely folded, gaze fixed somewhere out over the dark water. For a long moment, he didn’t speak. Just listened to the sounds—the subtle lap of waves, the creak of the ship, the gentle hiss of night air moving across the deck. Then, finally:

“I know you seem much better now.” His voice was quiet, but not unsure. Measured, like always. Intentional, “But that kind of trauma doesn’t just leave you. Not really. It settles. Moves into the background, sure—but it doesn’t go away.”

Senku didn’t respond right away. His shoulders remained loose, hands in his pockets, but his eyes sharpened just slightly.

Ukyo gave him a small glance, something thoughtful behind his expression. “I’m not trying to dig,” He added. “Just… When you talked about how weird it felt coming back from Uganda—the quiet being *too* quiet, the world feeling wrong even though it’s ‘normal’... I get that.”

He let the words hang between them for a second, “I had something similar. After I got discharged from the sub,” he went on, voice still soft but clearer now. “The silence underwater becomes so constant that you stop noticing it… and then suddenly, you’re back on land, and everything feels wrong. *Louder* somehow, even when it’s quiet. It messes with your head. And it doesn’t really stop just because the mission’s over.”

Senku tilted his head, studying him.

“What I’m trying to say,” Ukyo finished, “Is that I know what that kind of recalibration feels like. So if you *ever* want to talk—about Uganda, about coming back, about

whatever's still ringing in your ears—I'm here."

There was no pressure in his voice. No expectation. Just steady, honest quiet.

A silence that didn't demand anything in return.

Senku was still for a long beat, processing. Then he nodded once—not dismissively, not politely, but like someone filing away a piece of data for future use. A rare kind of acknowledgement.

"…Thanks," he said.

And he meant it.

Senku lingered in the silence after Ukyo's words, hands still tucked in his pockets, eyes drifting toward the horizon like it might offer an easier topic. The wind rustled his coat slightly, the faint sound of voices still carrying from the deck behind them—Gen probably already poking through some leftover rations or plotting his next matchmaking move.

It felt weird.

The air between them wasn't heavy exactly—just awkward. Tentative.

Then he shifted his weight, glanced sideways, and muttered, "That all?"

Ukyo gave a quiet chuckle. "Pretty much," he said, then added with the smallest curve of a smile, "Also… I'm happy for you and Gen."

Senku made a face like someone had just suggested he hug a cactus. “Urrgh. Thanks, I guess,” He muttered, clearly unsure what to do with that. “But we’re not together. I turned that down.”

He waved a vague hand. “Which you probably already know, because I’m assuming you heard the whole thing.”

Ukyo didn’t deny it. He just smiled again—calm, unreadable, but kind—and started to walk away without another word.

Senku stood there for a second longer, watching him go.

Then sighed under his breath.

Senku stayed by the railing a while longer, head tilted back, eyes tracing constellations he could name in his sleep. They shimmered quietly above the ship, pinpricks of ancient light cutting through the crisp night sky. The cold wind tugged at his sleeves, but he barely noticed.

He wasn’t thinking anymore—not actively. Just… feeling. Which was worse, somehow. Eventually, he pushed off the rail and made his way down the corridor, toward the room they'd been calling the “lab,” even though it had slowly become something else. Their bunkroom. Their meeting space. Their shared chaos hub of scribbled formulas and half-built contraptions. He didn’t remember when it shifted. But now that he was paying attention, it was obvious.

He opened the door quietly.

And froze.

Gen was already there—slumped sideways against the work table, head tucked into one arm, breathing deep and even. The low light from the desk lamp painted his face in soft

amber, casting shadows beneath his eyes that were too dark to ignore. The other arm hung limply off the side, fingertips nearly brushing a stack of half-crumpled blueprints. Their blueprints. Notes still scattered across the table, tea-stained diagrams, makeshift plans for future builds. The science they'd built together.

It made sense, logically. They'd only gotten maybe an hour of sleep, tops. Gen was running on fumes.

But emotionally?

Senku's heart kicked in his chest like it had missed a beat.

He stood there for a long moment, just staring. At Gen's lashes resting against his cheek. At the slight crease between his brows that hadn't faded even in sleep. At the familiar, two tone colour of his hair that made him easy to spot even in a crowd of strangers. He hadn't realized until now how much space Gen had taken up—how normal it had become to look up and expect him there, making jokes or offering some unexpectedly sharp observation or calling him "Senku-chan" with that smug little smile. It had only been a week or so since they started this reaction, he would come up with the exact time but even his midn was feeling frayed around the edges right now.

And now, here he was.

Asleep.

In the middle of their notes. In the middle of Senku's world.

Senku swallowed hard. His hands twitched at his sides.

"…Dammit," He muttered under his breath.

His voice didn’t wake Gen.

But the way his pulse kept jumping in his throat?

That was a problem. A data point. One he wasn’t ready to process yet. So instead, Senku stepped quietly inside, pulled the blanket off the spare cot, and draped it over Gen’s shoulders with slow, precise movements. He didn’t touch him—not really. Just let the edge of the fabric settle against his arm. Then sat down across from him at the workbench, eyes lingering on Gen’s face for one moment longer before forcing himself to look away.

There were calculations to finish.

And maybe—if he was lucky—his heart would shut up long enough to let him do them.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, so obviously this was a hard one for me. I'm so ready to move away from this. I won't have another interlude for some time. This was tough for me.

On tumblr I have the emails that Senku sent Taiju, Yuzuriha, and Byakuya when he was in Africa. Linked below:

First Email
Second Email
Third Email

Also I have a prewritten story that I am releasing at the same time as this one. It's a Ryusen fic and you can check that out here

Also guys, I think I'm going to set an update schedule for this fic. I'm going to update from now on Saturdays starting officially on the 19th of this month. I may release some things earlier but it just depends on if I think I can get two chapters done in one day.

All of the reviewers and everyone supporting this fic have been so amazing, but I'm honestly so glad to leave this Ebola Arc behind. I feel like I've been working on it forever and since I had to rewrite it again it just feels like I can't get it right and URGH I'm gonna stop complaining now but seriously everyone thank you so much for all the support and I'm excited to get back to the main content.

On a side note, one person who I see on TikTok who suggests fics suggested MY FIC OMG I WAS GONNA CRY TEARS OF JOY WHEN I SAW IT ASDFASDFADFASDF Anyway. Seriously thanks for all the support guys!

Side note to my side note, I was on tumblr and I heard that one of the best RadioApple fics has just completed and I haven’t caught up on that in like a year so I goooottttaaaaaa read that now.

Chapter 15: Episode 3 Part 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was an empty feeling in his chest, like he had been cored out by all the emotions that he had gone through yesterday. Admittedly it was probably a good thing to have worked through them, to have that release, even if it didn't sit well with him mentally at the moment.

Senku took a walk off the ship. He needed it—needed to not be next to Gen for a few hours. Dawn had just broken, giving him a rare sliver of time alone. A few hours around people who weren't watching his life on the big screen was just what he needed. He was glad they were probably done diving into his pre-petrification past—*for now*, at least—but less thrilled about what came next. Soon, everyone would be watching him plan the move against Tsukasa.

And layered on top of that, *like a fresh chemical irritant*, were the emotions the Mentalist kept dragging out of him. Too much warmth. Too much understanding. Too much *touching*.

Senku ran a hand down his face and stared up at the sky.

He didn’t want a relationship.

But he couldn’t stop *walking straight toward one*, like a slow-motion train crash.

Even now, his feet were carrying him to Kaseki, a hastily sketched diagram tucked under his arm—plans for a bunk bed he definitely wasn’t designing for *any reason involving Gen’s proximity*.

For someone who kept saying *no*, his brain and body weren’t listening to a damn word of it.

“Senku! What kind of crazy project do you have for me today?” Kaseki boomed with delight. “I hope it’s something interesting!”

Senku shifted his weight to one leg, resting a fist on his hip as he handed over the blueprint. “Unfortunately not. Just something simple. A bunk bed setup for the lab—some of the experiments I’ll be running soon might require extended observation periods. Think you can handle it?”

Kaseki looked offended. “Something this easy? Who do you think you’re talking to?! I’ll have it done by the end of the day!”

...There goes *any* excuse to avoid Gen tonight.

Well. They were both rested. They could focus on science again. No need to avoid anything. Senku thought back to Gen, faintly lit by candlelight, taking mental notes on Senku’s state with that same calm, clinical voice. The precision of his observations. The way he’d pressed their ankles together. How close their legs had been. The pulse check. The smug statistical commentary about heart rate fluctuations. The expression he’d made when Senku didn’t pull away.

“Senku? Are you okay? You just turned bright red,” Kaseki asked, blinking.

Senku sucked air through his teeth.

This was a problem.

Senku exhaled sharply through his nose.

“Tch.”

It was fine. He was *fine*. Gen was just... persistent. Like gravity or entropy. Of course his thoughts kept circling back.

“Unbelievable,” Senku muttered. He blinked himself back to the present, forced his mind to focus on the almost worried looking Kaseki before waving him off with a 'I'm fine' and moved farther into the village. He ignored the older mans eyes drilling worriedly into his back. After all, Kaseki really didn't have anything to worry about, it was just his body not listening to his wants and instead focusing all too much on *Asagiri Gen,* and there didn't seem to be any fixing that.

Senku didn’t head straight back to the ship. His brain itched for something useful. Something *else*. A project to dismantle and rebuild. A theoretical problem to solve. Something mechanical, explosive, dangerous—anything but this *quiet, gnawing awareness* that Gen was probably awake by now, stretching lazily on a stool that wasn’t meant for sleeping, with smug eyes and—

He stepped over a tangle of roots and pulled out a stick of graphite, half-broken in his pocket. Maybe he’d chart a few new paths out here. Give himself something concrete to work with. Anything to take his mind *off*—

—Gen slouched in a candlelit room, reading notes they’d written together.

—Gen whispering softly about version of Senku who couldn't stop crying.

—Gen *smiling*, like he already knew the chaos he was causing.

He leaned against a low tree branch and stared out at the hills.

He’d always known Gen was good at getting into people’s heads. It was half his whole shtick. But Senku had stupidly assumed *his* brain would be a little harder to crack.

Clearly not.

Senku pinched the bridge of his nose.

This was definitely going to require more data. And, annoyingly... probably a conversation.

Eventually.

Senku was half convinced that the constant proximity was to blame, that after they were finished watching all this it would stop, but he knew that was wishful thinking and denialism at best.

Senku looked back toward the ship, knowing it was nearly time to make his way back. Before he could, Senku spotted the telltale bob of a watermelon helmet peeking over the side of a crate near the ship's window into the area they were using for reactions. He paused mid-step, one eyebrow raising as he watched the tiny figure shift, reposition, then *shush* herself with both hands.

He didn't have to ask. He already knew exactly who it was.

Silently, he walked up behind her until he was close enough to tap the top of her helmet.

"Spying mission going well, Great Detective Suika?"

Suika yelped, nearly tipping forward over the edge of the crate. "Senku!!"

He gave her a faintly amused look, arms crossing. "You're not exactly being as subtle as usual, y'know."

"I *was* being subtle!" she protested, turning around on her knees. "I wanted to know what everyone's doing in there! Everyone has been on the ship for hours, for DAYS in a row."

Senku glanced toward the lab and the sound-damp main room of the ship, most of everyone had started to file in to get ready to watch more of the footage, "Reaction room recon, huh? Trying to figure out what has them all so captivated?"

Suika nodded earnestly. “Ryusui and Gen and Chrome all keep sneaking snacks in like it’s some kind of secret clubhouse! And Yuzuriha looked like she *cried* earlier, but she was also smiling? I just wanna know what’s going on!”

Senku huffed a soft laugh and crouched beside her. “They’re watching something important. Something about... well, the past. Nothing dangerous. Just a lot of old memories getting stirred up.”

Suika tilted her head. “Is it about you?”

Senku paused for half a beat. “Yeah,” He admitted. “Kind of a lot about me, actually.”

She squinted at him behind her helmet, somehow reading more than he wanted her to. She was impressive like that, probably best to keep her away from Gen, “Are you okay?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t explode or burst into flames, so I’d say that’s a solid win.”

“Hmmmm,” Suika said suspiciously. “That sounds like a *not okay* answer.”

“Too bad, 'cause it’s the one you’re getting,” He retorted, flicking the edge of her helmet with a light *ting!*

She giggled. “Fine! But if you ever *do* explode, I wanna be the first to see! That would be so cool!”

“Gee, thanks, Suika,” He said dryly. “Truly touched.”

She beamed up at him. “Wanna help me spy for a little while longer?”

He hesitated—then sat down beside her, propping one knee up. “...Sure. Why not.”

So they sat together behind the crate, peeking at the quiet hum of life onboard the ship. Suika whispered little speculations under her breath (“Oooh, Ryusui’s pacing again—that means something *dramatic* happened!”), and Senku just let himself breathe for a moment. No pressure. No expectations. Just him and a kid too curious for her own good. Time passed quickly when he spent it around Suika, allowed himself to relax and just listen to her silly theories and all too accurate observations. He hadn't even noticed that it was about an hour ago that he was supposed to go in there himself.

“Spying, hm?”

Senku’s head turned slowly, already regretting his life choices.

Ryusui stood a few feet away with one eyebrow arched and his arms crossed, radiating the smug energy of a man who knew *exactly* what he’d just walked in on. Which could only mean one thing, Gen had predicted this, “Senku, Senku… hiding out behind crates with a child spy? I knew you were avoiding us, but this is a new level of commitment.”

Suika squeaked and immediately dropped back into her crouch. “Eeep! We weren’t doing anything suspicious!”

“You literally just admitted it was suspicious,” Senku muttered under his breath, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

Ryusui strode over with that usual energy and leaned casually against the same crate they’d been crouched behind. “We’re moving into the next part of the footage, and I do believe *someone’s* emotional avoidance quota has been met for the week. Time to clock back in, partner. -- That, of course, being Gen's words paraphrased and not my own.”

Senku gave him a flat look. “You work for the Mentalist now?”

“Not directly,” Ryusui replied with an infuriating grin. “But he did mutter something about dragging you back by the hair if necessary, and I respect initiative."

Suika tugged at Senku’s sleeve, eyes wide behind her watermelon helmet. “Wait—should *I* go in there too? I wanna see the cool stuff!”

Having Suika there would be relaxing, but that didn't mean that they should involve her. Now when things like him running experiments on petrification fluid and bringing back dead bodies would potentially be shown. “I think the Great Detective Suika has a different and more important job. Kaseki might need an extra pair of hands for his newest project and as part of science team, you're the only one who isn't already doing something that can help him.”

Suika frowned, clearly torn between curiosity and concern. “But… is Senku gonna be okay?”

Senku blinked. For a second, something flickered in his expression. Then he gave her a lopsided, tired smile. “Ten billion percent. Now, go bug Kaseki.”

Her face lit up. “Oh!! I will!”

She bounced off toward the bow of the ship, mumbling “Master Craftsman Kaseki!” with stars in her eyes.

Ryusui waited until she was out of earshot, then gave Senku a long, unreadable look. “You okay?”

“Define ‘okay,’” Senku replied, standing and dusting off his coat. “If you mean, ‘am I done mentally cataloging every embarrassing emotional response I’ve ever had,’ then sure. Let’s call it good enough.”

“Excellent,” Ryusui said, stepping aside with an exaggerated flourish. “Then get your brilliantly hot ass back inside.”

Senku shot him a mildly disgusted look.

Ryusui laughed. “Haha! What’s with that look, Senku?”

“I think you can figure it out,” Senku muttered, rolling his eyes.

Ryusui grinned like he’d won something. “But Seennnkkkuuu~ you don’t make that face when *Gen* compliments you.”

What the hell kind of emotional interrogation was this?

Senku gave him a flat, pointed look but didn’t answer. There was no point denying it. Of *course* he would’ve responded differently if it were Gen saying something like that. But that didn’t mean he was in the mood to acknowledge it out loud—especially not after spending the last hour *actively avoiding* those thoughts by babysitting the smallest spy in the Kingdom of Science.

He pushed open the door without comment.

It creaked slightly on the hinges as Senku stepped back into the room, Ryusui trailing behind like a smug escort returning a runaway asset. The group was mostly settled again, low conversation rippling as the next segment began to queue on screen—but Gen’s head turned the moment Senku entered, like he’d felt the shift in the room before he even looked.

He didn’t say anything.

Just studied Senku for a moment. Calm. Focused. That irritatingly unreadable mask he wore whenever he was in *professional mode.* Gen had probably told Ryusui exactly where he was going to be by predicting his choices based off how much he knew about Senku in addition to his masterful use of profiling and psychology—Gen was good at making those types of

predictions and more than that, he had been right. He had known exactly where Senku would be and likely who he would be with as well.

And that was the problem.

Senku had only ever *hated* emotional manipulation when it wasn't him doing it. But seeing it on Gen—*this* kind of Gen, quietly intense, clinical in the way he sorted through trauma like a scalpel through silk—*should* have been irritating.

It wasn't.

It was hot.

Disgustingly, distractingly hot.

Hot in a way that sent shivers down his spine, heated his stomach, made his fingers twitch with want to hold onto something—anything. It was distracting, it was unfair, he hated it almost as much as he liked it. Memories flowed through him, memories of Gen taking his mental apart piece by piece, understanding each one and noting it down.

Goddamn it.

He sat down stiffly, keeping a few inches between them on the bench as if that would help. It didn't.

Especially not when Gen leaned slightly toward him, not even touching but just *close* enough to register in his peripheral vision.

"You okay?" The mentalist asked quietly, like he didn't already know the answer.

Senku grunted. “Mentalist..."

Gen grinned in that evil way that meant he had an upper hand, “Yes, Senku-chan~?”

“Shut up.”

Senku turned his head to the side, just a little bit. The light in the room casting flickering shadows across Gen’s face, highlighting the sharp line of his cheekbone and the way his lashes caught the light.

Senku was going to die. Right here. On this bench.

No one would even know it was because *Gen was professionally competent and wore his features a little too well.*

He crossed his arms tightly, leaned back, and focused on the screen with all the intensity he could muster—which was a lot. This was only getting worse, not better. That conversation they’d had—about being *friends who sometimes flirted with each other*—felt like it had happened months ago. It didn’t match the reality of right now. Not even close. And the worst part? Senku didn’t know how to fix it. How to pause it. Wasn’t even sure he *wanted* to. Everything was a mess of emotions he was trying very hard to ignore.

Gen, gracefully, allowed him that.

But he *smirked*—just barely.

Like he *knew.*

Bastard, Senku thought, and it only made Gen more attractive. At this point, Senku was half convinced—half *delusional*—that the only reason he was still resisting was because he didn’t want to give in so easily. That it was a pride thing. Which wasn’t true. He didn’t *want* a

relationship. And yet his own mind kept whispering that maybe—just maybe—he was just being stubborn.

This level of self-betrayal could *only* be the mentalist's fault.

The screen started.

> *I don't have to be perfect—just enough,* Senku thought to himself as he smashed jars along the floor, ignoring the confused and concerned looks from his childhood friends as he stomped on the broken shards.
>
> "What the heck are you doing?" Taiju asked, eyebrows furrowed.
>
> Not that Tsukasa would *really* believe it, but Senku kept his voice casual. "Staging a scene, obviously. That way it'll look like he scared us off. Like we just grabbed some food and ran."
>
> "What do you mean by that? Are we really gonna give up?" Yuzuriha's voice was quiet, uncertain.

"Woah, it feels like forever since we were watching this part!" Taiju cheered, eyes wide with nostalgic excitement.

Senku rolled his eyes fondly. "Let's not forget we were facing off against a super-strong murderer, you big oaf. Maybe dial back the enthusiasm. Although..." He smirked faintly. "I'm kind of hoping we switch to *your* thought processes next."

Immediately, both Yuzuriha and Taiju flushed bright red, unable to look at each other.

Senku didn't look at Gen—but he could *hear* the smirk in the mentalist's voice as he leaned in just enough to whisper, "A little too blunt, Senku-chan~ We had a plan, remember?"

Senku sighed. "I'm starting to think our plan doesn't matter. Their own thoughts are going to give them away before we even get to the nudging phase."

He side-eyed the pair, watching their bright, mortified faces. Whatever they'd been thinking back then must've been *particularly* suspect to react that fast.

"That aside," Francois interjected smoothly, "I do believe this is a rather unconvincing attempt at staging a scene. I expect better from Monsieur Senku."

Senku flinched—only slightly. Francois was sharp, but they really did have a talent for slicing straight to the heart of a thing. Not that he was going to *admit* anything. But no, it hadn't been a serious attempt at fooling Tsukasa. Not really. There was no way this kind of sloppy misdirection would throw him off. It had been for *Taiju* and *Yuzuriha*—to give them a mental win, to let them feel like they'd pulled off some kind of escape. A chance to reset, calm down, get focused.

Less panic, more productivity.

But unless the playback actually showed that part of his reasoning, Senku had no intention of telling them that.

> Senku glanced at her, then at Taiju—who, understandably, looked even more baffled. "No," he said, cracking a grin that was too sharp to be relaxed, "But it'll *look* like it."
>
> He gave a short laugh, trying not to let the nerves show. "If we can build some weapons of science before he realizes what we're *really* up to, victory's ours."
>
> Honestly, he didn't think they'd approve of the most likely endgame for this plan. But desperate times called for desperate, last-resort solutions. He still couldn't believe how absurdly unlucky he'd been—to get revived into this game world only to end up with Tsukasa as the final boss breathing down his neck.

"I suppose that just about confirms Francois's theory," Ukyo said mildly, one brow arched in Senku's direction.

Senku raised an eyebrow right back. He didn't answer, didn't flinch—just crossed his arms and stared down the group like he had no intention of offering a single scrap of explanation.

They looked at him anyway. *Waited* for him to clarify. But Senku, who could already feel the impending collective outrage once they realized what his full plan was, had no intention of speeding that up. Let them find out naturally. Getting scolded *earlier* was a waste of time—and a completely *illogical* one, at that.

Gen seemed to pick up on it instantly, because of course he did. He smoothly redirected the attention.

"You say you're unlucky," Gen mused, folding his legs neatly beneath him, "But you're the luckiest unlucky person I've ever met. Statistically, it's kind of fascinating. Sure, you wake up to a murderer as one of your first revival buddies—but then you also have a pre-made village of descendants who basically exist just to help you save the world. Fate clearly can't make up its mind about you."

Senku shivered.

Gen needed to not talk about statistics in that voice. Not while he was sitting *that* close. He tapped a finger against his leg, hard, trying to focus on the rhythm of the number patterns in his head—*one, two, three, four, five*—instead of the way his pulse spiked when Gen said *statistically*. Was he easy? Is that what people meant when they said something like that?

Before he could spiral further, Taiju suddenly exclaimed, "Wait—so you made it look like we panicked and ran? That's kinda genius. But also, wait… that means you were planning for Tsukasa to *chase* us?! Why did you act like we could get away with it then?!"

Heh. Still slow on the uptake. But endearing. Senku couldn't help the faint flicker of fondness.

He tilted his head with a grin that said everything and nothing at once. "Don't you want to find out like everyone else, big oaf? I thought you didn't like spoilers."

It was true. Taiju had always *hated* spoilers. Senku used to predict movie endings just to get under his skin—and Taiju would sulk for days afterward, complaining about how it ruined the whole experience. Obviously, this was a different situation entirely, but—

Taiju blinked, then nodded like it made perfect sense.

Yuzuriha just shook her head at him with a soft smile and eyes full of quiet affection.

> “Of course, if he catches on, it’s game over. So the race is on, you guys.”
>
> They packed the essentials, loaded up on food (Thanks, Tsukasa! Your hard work won’t be in vain—shame about the whole *murder* thing), and Senku laid out the next step.
>
> “We’re heading out to find materials to make weapons. First stop: Hawken. It’s basically a fun little camping trip. Only 80 kilometers. Nothing major!”

"Hehe... That's our Senku-chan, acting like a massive amount of work is basically nothing!" Gen claimed, making an incredulous face. He seemed to recall a similar walk following after Francois as they made their way to where Ryusui was, and that was even shorter.

"I was being sarcastic," Senku admitted.

"It wasn't too bad!" Taiju chirped out.

"I mean we did do similar amounts when trying to find oil," Chrome mentioned thoughtfully.

Senku, who was getting tired just remembering it, shot him a withering look, Chrome wasn't spared either.

Gen tilted his head, humming thoughtfully. “I really do wish we had a proper doctor for you to see, Senku-chan. Someone who could look at the damage and see if it’s reversible.”

Senku waved a hand dismissively. “Once we track down the petrification device and I figure out how to reverse-engineer it for Tsukasa, we could probably use it on me too. Heal the remaining damage in a snap.”

Gen's smile didn't falter, but his mind snagged on that comment.

He'd do it again. Just like that—casually, like letting his body turn to stone was no more significant than a nap. Gen, who still had nightmares about those long, empty years in the dark, felt his stomach twist. Seventy years of silence. Of drifting half-awake through blackness. It hadn't broken him, but it had come close. And Senku had been in that void even longer. The fact that he could suggest it so flippantly—almost *volunteer* for it—was odd to say the least. Gen couldn't quite decide what disturbed him more: the casual tone, or the ease with which Senku seemed to accept the idea of doing it all again.

It wasn't fearlessness. Gen knew that. He'd seen fear in Senku before—buried deep, often disguised as logic, sometimes hidden under layers of sarcasm. No… this wasn't a lack of fear. If anything, Senku ran better on fear, embraced it with a wild grin, but there was no grin in sight.

> Senku pulled the straps on Taiju's pack tighter, more than happy to let his human tank of a best friend take the brunt of their supplies.
>
> "That's like two marathons! We can knock it out in five hours!" Taiju said brightly, entirely too cheerful.
>
> Senku shot him a deadpan look, tone bone-dry. "Maybe a freak of nature like you can."
>
> Yuzuriha, he was relieved to note, seemed to be adjusting okay. Quiet, a little wide-eyed, taking everything in. Just looking at the landscape in sad awe. Senku remembered that feeling—those first few days, the realization of how completely the world had changed.

"That feeling of waking up really is something else…" Ukyo said softly, a faraway look in his eyes.

Kohaku tilted her head. "I've kind of wondered what it was like…"

"Well," Ukyo said, tone contemplative, "Ryusui and Francois were… strong outliers when it comes to initial behavior. Senku and Taiju were awake the whole time, so their experiences are a different category entirely. Yuzuriha had a very specific shock scenario with a murderer

chasing us right out of the gate. That kind of leaves Gen and me as the only ones with relatively ‘standard’ wake-ups.”

“For me,” Ukyo continued, “it felt kind of like waking from a really deep, restful sleep. Honestly? I felt great. Alert. Almost euphoric.”

“You heard it here first, folks,” Ryusui declared, throwing a hand dramatically in the air. “Ukyo has confirmed it—*I* am exceptional!”

Ukyo blinked at him, pinched the bridge of his nose, and muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like a prayer for patience.

Gen gave a soft chuckle. “Well, while I do share Ukyo’s bewilderment at that particular leap in logic,” He said with a grin, “I’d say the clearest dividing line is less about individual personality and more about the method of preservation.”

His tone shifted slightly—subtle, focused, clinical. “From a psychological standpoint, we’re all still operating under the assumption that the petrified brain retains the same passive patterns as a brain in deep, uninterrupted sleep. No memory formation, no sensory input. The revival fluid is simply… the alarm clock. It reboots the system. Assuming the petrification didn’t cause damage, the mental state upon waking should be more or less consistent across most individuals. So the variances we’ve seen—panic, euphoria, confusion—they’re likely environmental. Contextual. Emotional.”

He turned slightly, gaze drifting toward Francois and Ryusui. “Though of course, strong preexisting ego structures might also accelerate post-revival coherence.”

"All I heard is that I was right about the exceptional part," Ryusui grinned back in response. Francios shook their head, but there was something fond about it.

Senku inhaled sharply, the world momentarily muffled.

Because Gen had taken his wrist again.

Not noticeably. Not enough to draw attention. But those fingers were *there*, pressed to the inside of his wrist with practiced ease—professional, precise, devastating.

And Gen was smirking.

His wrist twitched toward the contact—traitorous. His brain shouted logic, but his nerves fired like Gen's touch was a defibrillator. Of course *he* would notice. The bastard probably had a whole spreadsheet in his head titled *Senku Cardiovascular Anomalies—Updated Live*.

Senku did *not* look at him.

Ukyo was watching them again. So was Ryusui. Neither of them were being subtle about it.

Senku stared straight ahead, jaw tense.

Gen, still measuring his pulse, leaned in just slightly and said under his breath, far too casually, "Elevated again. Even more this time than the l last time I checked. Curious. I wonder what triggered it this time."

"I swear to god, Mentalist," Senku hissed through clenched teeth.

Senku didn't finish the sentence. He couldn't. His brain had stopped supplying words and was instead busy firing off irrelevant facts about temperature regulation and the increased effects of dopamine release under heightened analytical observation.

He was going to die.

A breeze caught a flurry of petals, and one floated gently into his hand.

"The cherry blossoms look different," Yuzuriha murmured, watching the trees around them.

"That's because the ones we're used to—*Prunus yedoensis*—aren't self-pollinating," Senku replied, studying the blossom in his fingers.

"So that means…?"

"They probably went extinct right off the bat."

"I wonder how many other things went extinct…" Chrome asked quietly, his voice tinged with sadness.

Senku took a deep breath, trying—and mostly failing—to ignore the fingers still pressed lightly to his wrist. The touch tingled up his arm, coiled warm in his stomach, completely unwanted and extremely distracting. There was science to explain. That was ten billion times more important than the way Gen's thumb had settled over his pulse like it *belonged* there.

"Most of the man-made modifications—like those cherry blossom trees—can be recreated if we really need them," Senku said, forcing his voice even. "So I wouldn't worry too much about that."

He hesitated, just for a second.

"The bigger loss is everything we *can't* get back. The literature. The languages. The art. Entire cultures—gone."

Senku's tone didn't shift much, but the weight behind his words lingered. The hard sciences? Those were recoverable. They were based on physical principles. On measurable, provable facts. Yes, it would take time—years, maybe decades—but eventually, someone could rediscover it all. The arts, though? The histories passed down through songs, oral storytelling, handwritten journals in languages no one spoke anymore?

Gone.

Sure, *he* had perfect recall. He could probably rewrite all the Shakespeare he'd read in high school if someone gave him enough paper and patience. But that was just *one* sliver of the archive. One man's brain wouldn't bring back the full breadth of humanity's cultural legacy.

If he'd been a historian instead of a scientist, Senku thought, he probably would've cried the second he woke up. Cried for the knowledge that couldn't be rebuilt. The parts of humanity that wouldn't rise again.

Some losses were tragic.

Some were unfixable.

> She fell quiet, expression dimming a little. Senku winced. He hadn't meant to sound so clinical. But that was the reality of this world now—beautiful and brutal. Awe and loss, always tangled together.
>
> Not that he was the type to wax poetic about cherry blossoms, but… there was something quietly striking about seeing real, naturally occurring trees like this. The wild kind. Unengineered. Not planted in neat rows for aesthetic impact during tourist season. Science was incredible—of course it was—but that didn't mean humanity should bottleneck itself with unnecessary artifice. If something could be functional, sustainable, and beautiful, why not all three? Natural blossoms supported pollinators. Supported life. That mattered too.
>
> Still. He wasn't an environmentalist. He'd leave that fight to someone else.

That did kind of make her feel better, Senku's thought process. Of course Senku would think of it that way, and the nature of it was beautiful. It was also beautiful how deeply effected Senku was by the not to subtle hold that Gen was putting on his wrist. There were lots of beautiful things in this world. She was curious though.

She tilted her head, voice soft. "Senku… is this what the world would *really* look like without humans? I mean… did enough time pass for it to go back to how it was supposed to be?"

Senku didn’t answer right away. She saw it then—that flicker of calculation take over. His brain clicking into motion like a machine spinning to life. It was fascinating. The way hyperfocus pulled him away from the tension of Gen’s touch. Like science itself could shield him from being perceived too deeply. And when he spoke, it was matter-of-fact. Quiet, but sure.

“A lot of the damage we did would’ve healed. Ten billion percent.”

He adjusted slightly, slipping into lecture mode like it steadied him.

“If humans vanished all at once, plant life would reclaim most urban areas in about five to ten years. Cracks in roads give roots a way in. Vines would overtake buildings—especially in humid areas. Without constant maintenance, infrastructure falls apart fast.”

His voice had that distant edge to it. That tone he used when the emotions were too close, and data was the safer route through, “Within fifty years, most metal structures would start collapsing from rust and stress fractures. Without electricity, nuclear plants would go into meltdown after their backup systems failed—but over time, even those zones would be overtaken by resilient plants and wildlife. We’ve seen it happen already in places like Chernobyl. Give it a few hundred years, and forests would cover most of the continents again. Animals would migrate. Ecosystems would rebuild themselves. In a thousand years… cities would just be strange hills or dips in the landscape where we carved them out."

Yuzuriha blinked, stunned into silence by the weight of it. Somehow, she hadn’t expected that much recovery. The world had always framed it like humans were an irreversible curse on the environment. In school, they’d been warned about plastics that never broke down, about oceans choked with waste, about global warming and climate collapse. She remembered diagrams with red zones and skull icons. The Earth was always the victim in those lessons. Humanity the villain.

And yet…

Nature hadn’t given up. It just waited. If they hadn't heard from Whyman she probably would have thought that Earth itself wanted this reset.

Gen hummed softly beside Senku, not interrupting, but clearly impressed.

Senku tapped a finger against his knee. “Carbon dioxide levels would drop. Ocean health would improve. And once the last satellites fell out of orbit and burned up… you’d barely know we were here. Nature’s slow. But it’s stubborn.”

He had tried *so hard* not to think about Byakuya. Fresh as his old man was on his mind right now, so too was those wishes and hopes that Senku had sometimes. They crept in like it always did when he let his guard down: *What if Byakuya had been petrified? Would he still be here? Would be still be up there, waiting for revival?*

But if he had been…

Senku's jaw clenched.

If he had been on the space station, petrified or not—then when the satellites came down… so would he. He would’ve burned up. Unrecoverable. Undone not by the disease, but by Earth’s gravity and time. Not even able to leave behind the legacy that was Ishigami Village. If there was one thing that Byakuya deserved, it was legacy.

Senku reached up, pinching the bridge of his nose hard—like he could press the emotion back down into his skull before anyone noticed. It didn’t help. But the slow sweep of Gen’s thumb over the pulse point on his wrist—barely there, maddeningly gentle—*did*. He exhaled, tension bleeding off his shoulders like steam from a cracked flask. Couldn't have pulled away if he wanted to.

Fuck.

Distract. Pivot. *Science.*

He cleared his throat and shifted forward. “I’m sure what you’re thinking about is plastics,” Senku said, voice steadying now, almost casual. “High school science loves to toss that

around like a death sentence—borderline fear-mongering, honestly. So here's the reality. Plastics *do* last a long time. Polyethylene and polypropylene—the ones used in shopping bags and packaging—can take hundreds of years to degrade fully. But degradation *does* happen, especially with UV exposure, moisture, and microbial action. It's not forever. It's just… slow. Even the worst of our waste breaks down eventually under the right conditions."

He glanced at Chrome, who was visibly invested now, eyes bright. "Bacteria that can digest plastic already exist. We've found them in landfills. Evolution's doing its thing. Give it long enough, and nature will learn how to break down anything we left behind."

He paused. Just for a second.

Then added, with the faintest smirk tugging at one corner of his mouth: "It's almost beautiful. We thought we'd ruined the world—but all we did was build new problems for it to solve, and solve it did."

Gen, watching him with unreadable eyes, murmured, "That's very you, Senku-chan. Finding hope in the mess."

"Screw that! Tell me more about these crazy bacteria!" Chrome demanded.

Senku's smirk deepened—grateful, maybe, for the shift in tone. Grateful for Chrome being Chrome.

"Ten billion percent," He said, leaning back just slightly, like he was easing into a proper science lecture. "They're called *Ideonella sakaiensis*. Discovered back in the 2010s at a recycling plant in Japan, actually. They evolved to break down PET—polyethylene terephthalate—which is the plastic used in water bottles and synthetic fabrics."

Chrome's eyes widened. "Wait, seriously?! They *evolved* to eat plastic? You were totally right, evolution IS elegant!"

Senku couldn't help the snort that came from that terminology coming from someone other than Xeno's mouth, “Yup. Completely synthetic compound, and nature still found a way. They produce an enzyme called PETase—it breaks the long-chain molecules into smaller parts that can be digested. Then a second enzyme finishes the job.”

It *did* feel like they’d been walking forever.

It had only been a few hours, technically, but the weight of the gear and the sharp ache in his legs said otherwise. Senku was beyond grateful for the meals they’d eaten with Tsukasa—it had helped reverse some of the physical strain from starving for so long—but even with that, this trek was hell. His body still hadn’t recovered the fat reserves it needed to keep up. Yuzuriha, he noted, was handling it better than him.

That was fine. He’d push through.

“Man, what an amazing view!” Taiju called out, grinning as they crested a high ridge. The cliff overlook gave them a clear vantage over the surrounding terrain, green and vast.

“Honestly, she used to beat me in fitness class back in the modern world too,” Senku admitted without shame, stretching his legs out in front of him as if remembering the ache. It jostled the hold that Gen had on his wrist, so Senku moved his hand a little closer to the Mentalist, “At least until I came back from Africa. So some things don’t change.”

“Oh?” Gen hummed, a little too amused, Senku wasn't sure if was because of the conversation, “And here I thought you were more likely to be allergic to gym class altogether.”

“Haha! I can appreciate that kind of honesty,” Ryusui said, arms crossed as he leaned forward slightly, sharp eyes still glued to the playback. There was something uncharacteristically reverent in his voice when he added, “Especially paired with that gorgeous view.”

The footage had panned out—wide and breathtaking. Rolling hills, untamed forest, a vast sea of green untouched by humanity for thousands of years. The morning mist still lingered in some low valleys, and distant birds called across the open air. It was haunting. And beautiful.

"It doesn't exactly compare to the views from the balloon," Senku factually stated.

Yuzuriha closed her eyes as if resigned.

It *was* impressive. But more importantly—

Senku reached into his pack and pulled out a worn but functional sextant, raising it to his eye.

“Oh, what’s that? A scope?” Taiju asked.

“A sextant,” Senku replied, already focused on the horizon. “It’s been 35,970 seconds since sunrise.”

Gen let his thumb drift lightly across Senku’s wrist again, testing the boundary—and, to his surprise, Senku didn’t flinch. In fact, if anything, he leaned slightly closer. That was new. Encouraging.

Gen didn’t let it show on his face, of course. But internally, he cataloged the shift with clinical precision.

He’d honestly expected yesterday’s emotional collapse to push them back a few steps. Senku wasn’t exactly known for tolerating vulnerability, especially when it was *his own*. Gen had assumed he’d turtle up again, wall off the progress they’d made and pretend none of it had ever happened.

Instead… it was like something *cracked* open. Quietly. Invisibly. But definitively.

It was tempting—*painfully* tempting—to push harder. To take that opening and wedge it wide. Gen could already feel the impulse rising. Tease a little more. Shift just an inch closer. Let his fingers linger another beat too long. He could do it. He was good at it. But he reminded himself—firmly—that this was only working *because* he hadn’t rushed it. Slow. Steady. Predictable. Not manipulation. Or… okay, maybe a *little* manipulation. But not the cruel kind. Just the sort of gentle nudging that made someone feel safe enough to open a door they were already standing in front of.

God, he wanted him. No, well yes—Gen wanted to understand him in all sorts of ways. Same thing, really, when it came to Senku. Especially when Senku did things like casually lift a sextant to his eye all cute like then did something impressive like say that it had been 35,970 seconds since sunrise. The first moment he'd ever really noticed Senku, back before they even met for the first time, when all Gen had was a name and a carving on a tree. The counting. The logic. The ridiculous, beautiful consistency of it.

Yuzuriha blinked. "You just spit that number out like it's nothing…"

Senku didn't answer right away. He felt the familiar tick of seconds in his mind—always running in the background. He'd never stopped counting, not completely. Even now, when it wasn't precise anymore, not like it had been in petrification. You lost time when you slept. But the rhythm still clung to him like breath.

"A sextant's meant to help determine your exact location using the angle of celestial bodies and the time of day," he explained.

It wasn't ideal—especially not this one. The homemade version lacked mirrors and other refinements that would make it truly accurate. They'd need far more tech before they could build a proper version.

"This one's garbage," he muttered, lowering it. "Useful in theory, but we're not there yet."

"Did you update the design after you made the mirrors?" Chrome asked, practically vibrating with curiosity.

It made sense—Chrome would absolutely benefit from having one. As the self-proclaimed "Resource King," he was constantly heading out on expeditions. Giving him a proper sextant —or even a better version of the homemade one—wouldn't just fuel his curiosity; it would turn him into a mobile data collector. If Chrome could track distances, angles, and positions accurately, it would drastically improve their ability to chart the surrounding area and plan more efficient routes for gathering. Honestly, he was the perfect candidate. With a sextant in hand and that boundless energy of his, Chrome could become one of the most vital pieces in the Kingdom of Science's expanding frontier.

Senku glanced at him, amused. "Not yet. But if you're that interested, I'll draw up a new version. Just be ready for a math lesson so intense it might melt your brain."

Rather than looking daunted, Chrome's eyes *lit up*. "Bring it on!"

Kohaku groaned playfully beside him. “You could at least *pretend* not to be excited about more numbers.”

Chrome just grinned wider. “It’s *science math*. That’s the good kind.”

Senku smirked a little at that.

He exhaled slowly and let his eyes wander over the landscape. For all the setbacks, it was still something. Still progress. Even if trying to pinpoint their exact location with limited tools was like threading a needle blindfolded.

He *had* known their general position early on—thanks to where Yuzuriha was found—but the farther they got from that point, the more even slight angular errors could throw off his calculations. Frustrating. But not unsolvable.

“My best guess puts us somewhere near Kamakura,” He said finally. “But I’d love to know our real coordinates.”

“Think any buildings are still standing?” Taiju offered helpfully. “We could use them as landmarks, right?”

Senku shook his head. “Not after this long. Nothing major would’ve lasted intact.”

Chrome frowned thoughtfully, clearly working through the logistics in his head. “So even with all that time counting and a sextant, you still couldn’t be totally sure where you were?”

Senku gave a half-shrug from his seat, arms crossed. “Ten billion percent certainty requires better gear than a scrap metal contraption I eyeballed together with no mirrors.”

Francois inclined their head with a calm, measured tone. “Even the most exceptional mind cannot overcome the fundamental limitations of incomplete instruments. Still, narrowing their position down to Kamakura with only base geometry and memory—” their eyes flicked toward Senku, “—was a remarkable display of deductive reasoning.”

Taiju tilted his head. “Wait, I still don't really get it, doesn’t stuff like concrete last a long time? Wouldn’t there still be *something*?”

“If it was reinforced and protected, maybe, with the specific intention of having it last. Similar to the recording that Byakuya left,” Senku allowed. “But the average structure wasn’t built to last millennia. No maintenance, no repairs—time eats everything.”

There might be the occasional structure, sure—something reinforced, something lucky—but finding it in this overgrown sprawl would be like trying to find a needle in a haystack. As the English expression went.

Before he could say more, Yuzuriha suddenly took off running ahead.

Senku blinked. “Oi, what the hell—?”

He picked up his pace to follow.

She and Taiju really were quite the pair sometimes.

"Wait—did she just bolt?!" Chrome leaned forward in alarm, eyes darting after her onscreen. "Where’s she even going?!"

Taiju jumped a little in his seat, visibly flustered. “Oh man! I—I forgot she *does* that sometimes!” he added quickly, laughing nervously. “When she sees something she recognizes or wants to check out—whoosh! Usually it's some fashion shop.”

Kohaku blinked. “She didn’t even *say* anything. That’s not great for team coordination.”

“She’s not the only one who does that,” Gen said dryly, tilting his head toward Senku with a sly smile. “I can think of at least one other person who’s known to wander off mid-conversation because something interesting crossed their mind.”

Senku snorted. “Tch. At least *I* announce it.”

Gen, barely stifling a chuckle, added, “Endearing. Reckless. Honestly, I’d be more surprised if either of them acted with forethought.”

“Hey!!” Taiju yelped, face flushing red. “We think things through sometimes!”

Yuzuriha, watching herself sprint across the screen, clapped her hands together in front of her face, sheepish. “I was just… really sure I saw something. Sorry…”

Gen’s gaze lingered on the trio for a moment, thoughtful. He didn’t say anything aloud, but the pattern was clear. All three of them—Senku, Taiju, and Yuzuriha—shared the same brand of impulsive sincerity. It wasn’t just habit. It was environmental. Childhood friends. A lot of shared time. Gen couldn’t prove it without more direct information, but his instincts told him they’d clung to each other for a reason. Classic nurture-over-nature psychology. And somewhere in the background of all that? Likely a lot of time spent under Byakuya’s roof. He wondered if they learned it from Byakuya or from one another.

> *Is that...* Yuzuriha squinted ahead as she ran, certain that Senku and Taiju were still behind her. *It looks like there’s some kind of clearing up ahead...*
>
> “Kamakura’s landmark is still standing,” she gasped, panting slightly as the three of them came to a stop at the edge of the trees.
>
> It was… breathtaking.
>
> The Great Buddha stood tall—weathered, yes, but unwavering. And for a moment, Yuzuriha felt her chest tighten with something between awe and sorrow. It was incredible that it had survived. But seeing it, so alone, surrounded by a world completely changed, made the loss of everything else all the more real.

Senku let out a quiet breath as the screen shifted, relief barely concealed behind his usual blank stare. Thank god. Not that he was thrilled about the emotional gut punch that might be heading for Yuzuriha—he wasn’t a *monster*—but after everything they'd just watched from his past, the break in attention was welcome. He risked a sidelong glance. Yuzuriha had gone still, her fingers worrying the stitching on her dress. That flush across her face wasn’t just from embarrassment—it was nerves. Taiju pretty immediately gave her a pat on the back looking worried.

Gen leaned in a little, his voice smooth as always, just for Senku to hear. “Think her thoughts will give her away?”

Senku didn’t even look at him—just smirked, red eyes still on the screen. “I doubt we’d be so lucky. But hey, I’m willing to be wrong. Either way, we have a plan.”

He should have stopped there. Should’ve kept his focus forward. But there was movement—small, precise—just at the edge of his awareness. He looked down. Gen’s hand was resting lightly in the shared space between them. Fingers just barely brushing against his. Senku went still. It wasn’t much. Not enough to draw attention. Not enough to be overt. Just enough to register. Just enough to short-circuit whatever neutral calm he’d been clawing his way back toward.

Fuck.

> She didn’t have the luxury of lingering in that feeling—not with Tsukasa still out there—but the ache lingered anyway.
>
> “Our location is thirty-five degrees, nineteen minutes north by one-thirty-nine degrees, thirty-two minutes east,” Senku declared through labored breaths.
>
> Yuzuriha barely heard him.
>
> It looked so strong. So still. So unchanged. And she remembered—clear as day—standing there once before. Her younger self, maybe seven or eight years old, surrounded by cherry blossoms. Her parents holding her hands. One of the rare good days. One of the few quiet memories she had of them, before everything got messy.

She looked pale, her mouth drawn tight, eyes shining in a way that had nothing to do with nostalgia. There was a sharpness to it. A quiet bitterness, unnatural on someone like her, who usually wore kindness like second nature. Taiju noticed immediately. His arm was around her shoulders before she could even react, holding her close without a word.

Senku’s jaw clenched. His glare snapped to the screen like he could tear it apart with sheer focus. He took it back. He would’ve rather it was still showing *him.*

“You wouldn’t have done it if there was another way,” Gen murmured, picking up on the tension in an instant. His voice was low and calm, designed to ground.

Chrome was watching all of them, eyes flicking between their faces with open concern. Kohaku looked like she wanted to do something—comfort Yuzuriha maybe—but seemed rooted in place, unsure how. There was a flicker of something else in her gaze too as she watched the way Taiju held Yuzuriha. Something almost mischievous. The spark of a shipper, even now. She couldn't help it.

Francois stepped forward just slightly, voice poised and quiet but not cold. “A well-prepared table can still host a bitter meal. It does not reflect the fault of the guest.”

Senku wasn't sure if that made sense, but it seemed to work because Yuzuriha seemed to untense a little bit, her shoulders easing.

Yuzuriha turned her head at that—just a little—but her shoulders eased beneath Taiju’s arm.

That was 3,700 years ago.

A bitter-sweetness swelled in her chest.

At least she still had her real family. The ones who stuck by her. The ones who *were* still here, thousands of years later. She was lucky. So, so lucky.

Senku looked at her softly. He was lucky too. They all were. That horrible paradox of being the unluckiest lucky people to ever exist—dragged through the end of the world and still standing. But even when his mind drifted into *what-ifs*, even when the weight of everything lost felt like too much to quantify, he wouldn’t change it. Not really. Not if it meant losing the people still here.

Next to Yuzuriha, Taiju shifted, a little uncertain at first—then wrapped an arm around her shoulders with the kind of warmth only he could manage. Protective, unthinking, *constant*. She didn’t lean away. Just gave him a tiny nod, like she knew. Like she appreciated it.

Senku turned his head back toward the screen before either of them could catch the softness in his expression.

"Haha! The one thing that money can't buy!" Ryusui claimed with a broad smile.

Francois felt their lips turn up, "Quite."

Tears slipped down her cheeks before she could stop them.

“Hey! What’s wrong, Yuzuriha? Did someone make you cry?!” Taiju’s voice, full of panic, jolted her out of it. “WAS IT ME?!”

Yuzuriha covered her mouth as a soft chuckle bubbled up—unexpected, even to her. At the time, it had made everything feel more emotional, more raw. But looking back on it now? Taiju had been kind of cute when he did that. Earnest, panicked... just like him.

“Yuzuriha?” Taiju asked, startled by the sound. He pulled back slightly, worried she might be crying again—only to blink in confusion when he realized she was actually laughing.

She let out another quiet giggle, her cheeks flushing pink. “Sorry, Taiju. Just ignore me.”

“I don’t want to ignore you!” he blurted out without hesitation.

Yuzuriha waved her hands in front of her face, flustered. “No, no! That’s not what I meant—I just…”

Senku, watching the awkward spiral from the corner of his eye, rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath, “Unbelievable. Can’t even suffer through the end of the world without dealing with weird-ass flirting. They need to just get this over with already.”

From across the room, Ukyo turned his head—slow, deliberate—and raised an eyebrow at him.

Senku looked away.

Ukyo hid a smile.

She almost cried harder from that alone.

"I'm not crying," she said quickly, spreading her arms out and trying to hide her face, though the flush in her cheeks gave her away. "I mean—I *am*, but not like that. It's nobody's fault, okay? It's just… a lot."

She looked down, swallowing. "I haven't even been awake a full day, and none of this feels real yet. But seeing the Great Buddha like this—it made it click. That we're still in Japan. That thousands of years have passed and… we weren't here. I was thinking about my parents. About you two. About everything."

The silence that followed was gentle.

Then Senku, hands on his hips and wearing *that* expression—the smug liar face he always used when he was trying to sound braver than he felt—spoke up. "Tch. Come on. We'll beat Tsukasa before long. Saving humanity's just around the corner."

"Smug *liar face*?" Senku muttered, arms crossing as he narrowed his eyes at the playback. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Taiju burst out laughing. "Dude, *you know* exactly what she means!"

"I do *not*."

"Oh yes you do," Yuzuriha chimed in, eyes twinkling now, any flush having faded from her face as she got the rare chance to tease her friend, "You make that exact face every time you're trying to act like things are totally fine even when they're *definitely not*."

She paused, then added with a knowing grin, “Like that time in elementary school dodgeball? When they disqualified you for *bringing a bomb instead of a ball*—and when they asked you why you had it, you gave them that exact smug little liar face and said it was for a random science experiment.”

Senku grunted. “Tch. It *was* for a science experiment.”

Yuzuriha leaned forward with obvious delight. “Mm, yes, a science experiment that *just happened* to go off when the opposing team was making fun of Taiju for going easy on them.”

Taiju blinked again. “...Wait. *That's* why you brought it?”

Senku looked away. “I don’t remember the details. Now lets keep on topic. I do not do a thing, that's a normal face!"

Gen leaned in lazily from his side of the bench. “He definitely does a thing. Don't worry though, you're a decent liar, we just know you too well.”

“I *hate* all of you.”

Yuzuriha giggled, and Taiju leaned in toward Senku playfully. “C’mon, man. You *do* make that face. But it was kind of comforting, you know? Even if it was a lie, you were trying to keep us steady, or to be nice I guess. That’s just you.”

Senku rolled his eyes.

> She knew that face. It was the same one he made when he’d told her a terrible haircut looked *great*, only to admit afterward that Byakuya told him to lie about things like that sometimes.
>
> Before she could say anything, Taiju jumped in.

"Senku's right! Thank the Great Buddha for showing us the way. Still standing strong after thousands of years—like a god! That's gotta be a sign, right?"

Senku scoffed. "It's bronze. The chemical composition makes it highly resistant to corrosion."

"Oh gosh, how *horrible* of you, Senku-chan! You shouldn't try and factualize religion like that. So rude," Gen gasped dramatically, clutching his chest like the betrayal physically wounded him—though his grin was unmistakable.

Senku nearly rolled his eyes into the next century. "Mentalist, there is *no* way I'm buying that act. You're the same guy who told me we'd go to Hell together *if there was one.* You're not exactly a believer."

Gen pouted, unrepentant. "I *can* still appreciate that it's precious to other people. Now you're just being mean to me."

"You'll get over it," Senku said flatly.

But his fingers twitched.

The words were automatic, the rhythm familiar—but something in the silence that followed made it heavier. Gen wasn't touching him now, not really, just close enough that their hands almost brushed where they rested between them. And Senku found himself wanting—just for a second—to close that distance. To *grab* Gen's hand instead of pretending he didn't notice the closeness developing between them. To press their palms together and hold on like it might settle the strange flutter that had taken residence somewhere in his chest.

What the hell was happening to him?

He flexed his fingers slightly, just enough to feel the heat radiating off Gen's skin without making actual contact.

Ohhh… there it is, Gen thought, biting back a grin. *Another crack in the wall.*

He saw it. The faint twitch in his fingers. The near-miss where their hands almost touched. That brief, instinctive shift toward contact before Senku caught himself. Progress continued to be made, and soon enough, Senku-chan would give in. Just a matter of time.

> "But look!" Taiju pointed excitedly. "There's no plants or trees growing around it—like it wanted us to find it!"
>
> "Because it's leaking copper ions. Toxic to most vegetation."
>
> Yuzuriha smiled. Taiju was doing his best to cheer her up. But Senku—Senku *got* it. The back-and-forth, the casual bickering, the rhythm of it—it grounded her. *This* was what she needed. Then Senku blinked like something had clicked. "That gives me an idea. We'll use bronze to make mirrors."
>
> Before anyone could stop him, he was at the statue with a rock hammer.
>
> "Time to give my crappy sextant an upgrade~!"
>
> "That's—so wrong!" Taiju yelped, scrambling after him. "Senku, you can't just—!"

"Senku, you can't do that!" Ryusui shouted, looking genuinely horrified. For a moment, Senku wondered if the guy had some secret reverence for the Buddha statue—until Ryusui added, "Do you have any idea how much we could *charge* for people to come see one of the few remaining relics of the old world?! Don't damage it more than time already has!"

Ukyo gave him a flat look. "You can't be serious…"

"I'm *always* serious when it comes to brilliant business opportunities!" Ryusui declared, eyes alight with that rare blend of ambition and greed that somehow *wasn't* evil when it came from him. "Think about it—a whole city centered around this monument! Powered by clean energy. Built from the ground up as a shining symbol of humanity's return. You could sell the *idea* of it before it even exists!"

Francois nodded smoothly. "And I could establish the first Stone World restaurant adjacent to the site—centered on local agriculture, sustainable practices, and perhaps themed dishes inspired by the history of the region."

"Leave it to these two to pivot from existential trauma to real estate," Senku noticed a little amused. Yuzuriha didn't seem to mind, if anything she seemed to smile a little wider.

Ryusui clapped a hand over his heart. “Francois, you *see* the vision!”

Kohaku frowned, unconvinced. “You’d be surrounded by forest. It would be a death trap without proper defenses. Wild animals would tear through it.”

Senku shrugged, glancing at the screen with a smirk. “By the time we can pull something like that off, wild animals won’t be a threat anymore. We’ll be at the top of the food chain again.” He turned toward Ryusui, one brow raised. “I don’t hate the idea, Captain. But maybe let’s focus on getting across the ocean first before you start building your tourist empire.”

Ryusui just laughed—loud and unapologetic.

> Yuzuriha’s laughter bubbled out before she could stop it. Of course they were already causing chaos again. Later, after they’d gathered materials and settled for the night, they lay under the stars. Yuzuriha couldn’t quite sleep, but she listened quietly as Taiju and Senku’s voices drifted over the camp.
>
> “What the hell are you doing?” Senku asked, voice tired but dry.
>
> “Standing guard!” Taiju replied earnestly, it was kind of cute, “Tsukasa might find us. Or wild animals!”

It was kind of cute. It was kind of cute. It was *kind of cute!*

Yuzuriha repeated the thought over and over in her head as her face flushed a deep, overwhelming red. Her cheeks burned, her ears rang, and there was a weird lightheaded feeling blooming behind her eyes. Was it possible to faint from sheer secondhand embarrassment?

“Yuzuriha! Are you okay?! You went all red again!” Taiju cried, full panic mode engaged.

Kohaku gave him a look so deadpan it could’ve cracked stone. “Seriously?” she muttered under her breath. “What’s it going to take for you to notice?” She looked to Yuzuriha, who was currently trying to hide behind her hands. “She literally said it was cute. What more do you need? A written confession?”

“Eh?” Taiju blinked. “What're you talking about?”

Senku sighed from where he sat, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Ten billion percent exhausting,” He muttered. “It’s like watching emotional evolution in slow motion.”

Yuzuriha, still flustered beyond belief, peeked through her fingers with a tiny smile. Honestly… even if it was a little mortifying, it was also *very* Taiju.

And maybe that was kind of cute, too.

> Senku snorted—less annoyed, more… rueful. “Sorry, man. But if the lion-killer finds us, we’re screwed. Stressing about it is illogical.”
>
> It was Senku's version of comfort. She knew that.
>
> “Just go to sleep, you big oaf. You need rest to do your job.”
>
> There was a thud—probably Taiju flopping down onto one of the sacks.
>
> And then, finally, silence.
>
> It came easily for her, then—sleep. Wrapped in warmth, surrounded by familiar voices and the quiet hum of friendship.
>
> *They were still here. And that was enough.*

Yuzuriha smiled faintly, fingers curled at her chest. “It really was comforting, though. The way he said it—it’s like he already knew Taiju wouldn’t settle down unless he heard something like that. He knows him so well.”

Taiju rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “He *was* right. I was totally stressing about Tsukasa showing up, but after that… I just knocked right out.”

“You slammed your head into one of the sacks and were unconscious in ten seconds,” Senku commented, sounding almost impressed, "That was always an amazing skill of yours."

Chrome snickered. “Man, I wish I could fall asleep that fast.”

Ryusui broke it with a grin. “A shame, really. If I had been there, I would’ve given an inspirational speech to lull you all into slumber.”

Ukyo nearly rolled his eyes, *somehow I doubt that.*

“Which would’ve kept everyone awake for another three hours,” Gen said dryly.

Senku muttered, “Ten billion percent.”

They all chuckled.

> Tsukasa had to admit—he wasn’t entirely sure how Senku would react to what he’d said before. He had *hopes*, of course. That Senku would be logical. That he wouldn’t put up a fight. That he’d accept the world as it was now and walk away from science.
>
> But deep down, Tsukasa knew that was wishful thinking. A pipe dream, really.

“Heh. Guess he knows me pretty well then,” Senku muttered, unable to keep the faint edge of bitterness from his tone. But then he blinked, and it was like someone flipped a switch—his whole face lighting up with a rare, *unfiltered* grin.

“Oh, this is good. We did it.”

Gen’s brows furrowed for a moment, thoughtful—then his eyes widened as realization hit, and he matched Senku’s grin with a sharp one of his own.

“Holy shit,” he said, breathless with something like awe. “I guess we *did* do it.”

Senku was certain they'd already heard hints of Tsukasa’s thoughts earlier, but hearing this now—hearing the man’s inner voice again, layered with reflection instead of violence—settled something deep in his chest. They *had* access to his memories. His thoughts. Which meant one thing. They would make it on time. They would revive him.

Ryusui clapped his hands together with a spark of theatrical glee. “Haha! Looks like our efforts won’t be in vain. I can’t wait to meet Tsukasa myself one day.”

Ukyo’s smile thinned slightly at that.

He didn’t *disagree,* exactly. But still…

“That might be a complicated introduction,” Ukyo said quietly. “Your philosophies don’t exactly align.”

Ryusui just grinned wider. “All the more reason for a proper debate.”

Ukyo resisted the urge to sigh. *Of course* Ryusui would see that as a challenge instead of a risk. He wasn’t worried about betrayal—not now, not with everything Tsukasa had already done to make peace with Senku, and certainly not with his sister involved. But there was still potential for… tension. Ryusui might not be a greedy capitalist caricature, but Tsukasa had very specific views on people like him. Their alliance would hold—but it might not always be smooth.

Still… he had hoped. Because Senku was likable. And Tsukasa truly didn't want to do anything regrettable.

When he returned to the camp, it was empty.

He took a slow, methodical sweep of the area, scanning for anything out of place. "The room's been torn up," he murmured aloud. "And these footprints... looks like they panicked and ran."

But that didn't sit right with him.

Tsukasa crouched, examining the prints more closely. All of them were the same size—Taiju's. There were no smaller ones to match Senku or Yuzuriha.

"He has quite the sharp mind," Francois observed, tone calm but precise.

"Yes, but he also jumps to conclusions," Gen added, tapping a finger thoughtfully against his knee. "For example, he started to suspect Senku was still alive—when, by all logic, he should've believed he was dead. That kind of assumption isn't just bold—it's irrational."

Gen's eyes narrowed slightly as he considered it further. He didn't know what came to be that had Tsukasa thinking he killed Senku. Also, he didn't know *exactly* what had triggered Tsukasa's suspicions, but still—most people don't assume someone they personally killed has come back to life. That took a very specific kind of mindset. A kind of intuitive logic… but dangerously unmoored from evidence.

"Senku must've had Taiju stomp them in, trying to make it look like a panic." He frowned. "It's the only way there'd be any clear marks on earth this compact. Senku and Yuzuriha couldn't leave impressions this deep."

Clever. Sloppy, but clever.

"Seems like Senku wants me to think they ran off."

Tsukasa straightened slowly, eyes narrowing as he followed the line of footprints.

But no—this wasn't how Senku operated. He wasn't the type to flee in a panic. If he *had* decided to retreat, it would've been clean. Controlled. This mess? It wasn't his style.

Unless... Unless the footprints were a misdirection. A false lead.

What lay west of here?

He ran through the geography in his head. If they were heading west...

Hakone. Hot springs. The potential for sulfur.

Gunpowder.

"Heh. That was impressive," Senku admitted freely, a faint grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. There was a spark of genuine admiration in his eyes—sharp, engaged. Interested.

Gen didn't like that.

He felt it low in his gut, a little twist of something unpleasant.

Because of course Senku would be attracted to a display of intelligence like that. Of course the part that lit him up wasn't the danger, wasn't the tension—it was the deduction. The insight. The way Tsukasa had walked through Senku's plan and peeled it apart with precision. And maybe that would've been fine. *Maybe* Gen could've let it go if he weren't already seventy percent sure that Tsukasa was into Senku in *that* way. And now here Senku was, lighting up over the man's brain like he was halfway to giving him a lab coat and a petri dish.

"Well. Tsukasa does seem to have a flair for deductions," Gen said, just a bit too breezily. "Still... You'd think the so-called Primate High Schooler wouldn't make that many unfounded logical leaps. Just saying."

Tsukasa exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing. "He's going to try and make gunpowder."

He didn't want to believe it. He didn't think Senku *wanted* to go that route. They were similar in that way—both hated the idea of unnecessary violence. But if Senku thought he had no other choice... If he thought science was the only path to protect the future of humanity...

He would do it.

Tsukasa's jaw tightened.

"I can't let him."

He turned, already moving.

Senku... he thought, not without a touch of regret.

Don't make me stop you.

"No one made him do anything!" Taiju suddenly burst out, his voice sharper than usual—startlingly so.

The room went still.

Senku blinked, caught off guard. He'd heard Taiju get riled up before—plenty of times, actually—but this was different. There was something deeper in it. Not just frustration. Not just moral outrage. Something closer to... fear. And Senku understood it. Against his better judgment, he let himself imagine it—being in Taiju's position. Seeing your best friend crumple to the ground, motionless, while a known killer stood over him. No explanation. No warning. Just loss and helplessness in the blink of an eye.

Yeah. That would do it.

Empathy was annoying like that. Senku would definitely need to retire the "fake death for strategic value" maneuver from future plans if he wanted to keep his best friend intact.

Yuzuriha leaned over gently, placing a hand on Taiju's arm. The effect was immediate. He looked at her, smile twitching onto his face. It was forced—at first. But Taiju didn't *do* forced for long. A moment of eye contact and it softened into something real, vulnerable and fond.

"I get the feeling you're about to traumatize us again," Gen murmured.

His voice was light. Smiling, even. But the tone… it wasn't.

Senku rubbed the back of his neck, the way he always did when he didn't want to explain himself.

Gen’s head tilted slightly, eyes narrowed. “Are we really supposed to fall for the sheepish routine?”

Senku’s hand dropped immediately. Busted.

He didn’t defend himself—just shrugged, eyes flicking toward the screen. “Can’t change the past,” he said after a beat. “Or—I guess technically I am. But there are things that probably *shouldn’t* be changed. There’s a reason I chose this specific moment to show, not something earlier.”

> Senku had it all planned out in his head. The clues were there—just subtle enough. Just enough to lead them in the right direction without tipping off the wrong people too soon. If everything went smoothly, they'd piece it together *after* the fact. After the risk. After the point of no return. Of course, there was always a chance it wouldn’t come to that.
>
> But Senku highly doubted it.
>
> Tsukasa wasn’t the kind of person to leave unfinished business. Not with someone like Senku in the mix.
>
> The one thing that tilted the odds in their favor? Yuzuriha’s foot.
>
> Still partially petrified, not something that Senku planned, but it was helpful. A natural excuse to bring up the mechanics of revival fluid—enough to start building the logic in their heads without needing to lay out the full blueprint.

Gen couldn’t help himself—he was already piecing it together. The clues were stacking up. Senku had practically *invited* attention to his neck earlier, and not once had he denied it. That meant it was intentional. Which meant the healing properties of the petrification reversal weren’t just a side note—they were a critical part of the plan.

And if that was true… then the implications were obvious.

Gen didn't *want* to admit he was forming an out-there theory, especially not after dunking on Tsukasa for his wild assumptions. But Senku wasn’t exactly subtle when he wanted someone to notice something. That was part of the problem—he *knew* how to draw attention in just the right ways. A light brush to the neck. A clinical explanation of depetrification mechanics. Framed like passing commentary but… not really.

He flicked his gaze to Taiju and Yuzuriha. They were definitely starting to get it too. Yuzuriha's lips had thinned. Taiju looked like he was holding something in—his eyes glassy with some combination of pride and horror.

"I ten billion percent knew you guys would pull it off, so don't look like that," Senku said sharply, red eyes meeting theirs with a pointed glare.

And just like that—they softened. No anger. No accusations. Just unspoken forgiveness, immediate and instinctive.

Gen felt his jaw tighten.

They probably *shouldn't* have forgiven him that easily.

"Your toe's still kinda rocky-looking," Taiju finally said, worry already seeping into his voice like steam.

Yuzuriha didn't flinch. "Yeah, I noticed. Not gonna lie—it's not great. But don't worry about me, okay?"

"But I *am* worried!"

Predictable. Reliable. In the best possible way. Senku hid a smirk. They'd need to pause anyway—reset, treat the remaining stone. And Taiju's concern? As usual, a perfect distraction. It gave him time to steer the conversation without making it feel staged.

"Feels like the pain's finally starting to go away," Yuzuriha added, gently flexing her foot.

Taiju's eyes widened. "Does that mean the revival fluid has healing powers too?!"

Senku sighed—*loudly*—as he walked over, stretching his neck with a sharp crack and rubbing at the back of it like the whole conversation was exhausting. These two weren't Tsukasa. He could afford to lay it on a little thicker.

"It obviously has something to do with his neck," Chrome pointed out, a 'duh' expression painted on his face.

Francois gave a thoughtful nod. “Indeed. It appears Master Senku has been deliberately drawing attention to that region, as well as emphasizing the restorative properties of the revival fluid. Though I confess, the exact mechanics of the plan remain elusive.”

Gen exhaled slowly. He hadn’t wanted to say it—not really. But the pieces lined up too neatly, and now that Francois had spoken aloud what they were all circling around…

“Well,” Gen began, voice light but clipped, “Just spitballing here, but let’s suppose Senku had a leftover fragment of stone on the back of his neck. He’s drawing Tsukasa’s attention there to bait the attack—to make sure he aims *precisely.* And he’s tipping off Taiju and Yuzuriha, too—so they’ll know exactly where to pour the revival fluid before he dies.”

Silence fell.

And then—

“Ten billion points to you, Mentalist,” Senku said, the words quiet but undeniable.

Gen didn’t smile. For once, he didn’t even preen. He just sat there, staring straight ahead.

It was the right answer.

And he hated it.

Senku’s hand moved—settling atop his. No words. No fanfare. Just weight. Steady and deliberate. And then—of course—Senku shifted slightly, pressing an ankle against Gen’s again. Just like before. Contact layered with calculated reassurance. *I'm here. You're not*

alone. Gen nearly groaned aloud. *Seriously?* Was Senku—*Senku*—really trying to emotionally regulate *him*?

It was working. Dammit.

Senku was smirking at him.

The bastard.

"Sorry to interrupt your moment," Ryusui cut in, his tone all silk and zero sincerity. "But that was a hell of a gamble, Senku. Normally I'd praise a move like that, but maybe try not to bet the whole Kingdom on a long shot next time."

Senku shrugged, unapologetic—but didn't let go of Gen's hand. If anything, his fingers tightened, just slightly.

And Gen, to his own dismay, melted anyway.

Senku smirked at the effect this seemed to have on Gen. No wonder the Mentalist was so insistently pushing and manipulating toward this, subtle as he could be. The effect was quite plan to see.

> "As *amazing* as that would be," Senku said dryly, crouching near her foot, "it's just the cracks filling in. A natural part of the depetrification process. The stone layer doesn't peel off all at once—it mends itself as it breaks away."
>
> He glanced up, meeting both of their eyes briefly.
>
> "I mean, we're still alive, right? Even with cracks in our faces."
>
> The implication hung there.
>
> Subtle. But deliberate.
>
> Just like the rest of the plan.

"Senku, you better not ever do anything like this again!" Taiju burst out, voice cracking under the strain of too many emotions.

"You don’t have to tell me that, you big oaf," Senku replied, not unkindly. "I already decided that earlier. At the time, there wasn’t another option. That’s ten billion percent true. But now —" He glanced around the room, gaze landing briefly on each of them, "Now we’ve got a whole team. Smarter, stronger, better equipped. There’s no logical path that leads us back to a situation like *that.* Not anymore."

Taiju relaxed immediately, like those words came down from a prophet and not a scientist. Which, for Taiju, was probably the same thing.

Beside him, Gen exhaled slowly. There was no sound—just the soft rhythm of breath and the gentle squeeze at his hand that followed. Senku was seriously dangerous, trying to prevent anger at the slightest sign of it. Thankfully for the Scientist, that wasn't where Gen was going with this.

Dangerous man.

But Gen wasn’t angry.

At least, not anymore.

"Good thing you’ve got a world-class Mentalist now," Gen murmured, voice smooth but pointed, "Who can make those reckless death-fakeout plans at least *ten billion percent* more efficient and bring you not even a millimeter closer to actual death."

Senku didn’t even blink. "I *love* it when you sign yourself up for extra work, Mentalist."

There was a smirk on his face—sharp, teasing, *him.*

They made it to the springs.

Senku doubled over, panting, hands on his knees while the other two looked entirely too eager to throw themselves into the water like it was a resort getaway.

“You two better not be forgetting why we came here,” he managed between breaths, eyeing them both as they hovered at the edge like kids on summer break.

“Oh yeah, that’s right!” Taiju blinked. “So… why *did* we come here, Senku?”

Senku let out a low chuckle, the kind that probably earned him a guaranteed seat in Hell. “Oh, just to recreate one of the most influential inventions in human history.”

That didn’t mean it was *good,* of course. Just effective. Powerful. So powerful it had shaped entire civilizations, toppled empires, built industries, and redrawn maps. It stood the test of time—ugly, loud, brilliant in its awful simplicity.

“Smartphones?!” Taiju guessed again, bright-eyed.

Senku snorted. The big oaf had a real talent for mood-killers. “You really love those things, huh? Still wrong.”

He straightened. Held up two fingers like a trigger, stance shifting unconsciously—something old muscle memory borrowed from Luis, from the days Senku pretended not to be paying attention as the man did his field drills.

“The gun,” He said flatly. “We’re gonna make gunpowder.”

Playback resumes in two hours

Yuzuriha went still. “Right… this part,” she said softly. “I didn’t realize what he meant at first. It sounded so casual…”

Taiju gave a nervous laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I thought he was gonna say a really bright flashlight or something. Not, you know, *gunpowder.*”

“Your shock was visible,” Gen said smoothly, a glint of amusement in his eyes. “And valid.”

Ukyo's voice was quiet. "It's strange. You'd think restarting humanity would begin with something peaceful. But war always moves faster than peace."

Gen folded his hands, tilting his head slightly toward Senku. His voice dropped into something closer to a whisper, sly and bone-dry. "Well… just another lovely moment ensuring our reservation in the toasty afterlife. Isn't that right, Senku-chan? What did you call it again—the Stone Age version of Shiro Ishii?"

The air went still for a beat, but Senku's dark red eyes flicked toward him, weighted and dryly amused.

"If you're going to call me that," He said evenly, "I'm calling you Josef Mengele."

Gen placed a hand to his chest, gasping like he'd been personally wounded. "But Senku-chan, he wasn't even *Japanese!*"

"I considered other Japanese options," Senku replied, tone deceptively light, "But let's be honest. There aren't any other Japanese options on the level of Shiro Ishii, and I want our historical figures to end up on the same ring of hell together, right?"

He smirked.

Gen let out a breath that was half-laugh, half-resigned groan. "Ugh. Fine. You win this round."

Senku raised an eyebrow. "I usually do."

Francois, watching them both from across the room, adjusted their cuffs with a resigned sort of grace. "If the two of you are finished flirting via historical atrocity comparisons, perhaps we can refocus on the next morally questionable topic of conversation."

Chrome blinked. “Wait, *what* kind of flirting—?”

"Right lets put a pin on that! I want to check up on the science lab, I'll be back before the break is over." Senku announced, before strategically retreating.

Chapter End Notes

EARLY I KNOW! I fear that I will be too busy on Saturday to publish and I already had it done. I'm horrible with schedules but I have work literally all day on Saturday so here we are! Remember, update days are going to typically be on Saturday! Even though I'm breaking my word already...

I'm leaning very heavily into our Sengen, originally this chapter had another few thousand words but I decided to hold off and put it into the next one. I didn't want to overwhelm it since it already seemed to have so much progress.

Okay lets get a vibe for this, how do people feel about our next interlude including Rei and their story and some stuff with the astronauts? I just finished reading Byakuya Reboot so I'm more than prepared and a little wanton to include Senku's sister into the story but IDK how people feel about her in general.

I love me some Senku and Suika brotherly/paternal relationship and this will be popping up more as we continue, prepare your hearts for the cuteness that is Suika!

I'm so curious about what you guys think will be the stray to break the Sengen back and force them to finally be like FUCK IT - Honestly I'm surprised I let the slowburn continue this long. I WANT THEM TOGETHER SO BAD TOO PROMISE - That might be why I went so heavy in this chapter.

Alsoalso, I made a discord to put updates into, so that is linked below with my tumblr. I might pop in there and stream the transcription process for some of the episodes if anyone is interested. Plus just chat and what not.

Alsoalsoalso I tried putting my work on something other than Ao3 drafts to write it and OFC the formatting is fucked up on the block text. Jesus WHY.

Alsoalsoalsoalso I included some links to some things I had to look up cuz I know some of you say you look up certain things afterwards and what not so I was considering doing this more often, because with the new program its a lot easier to link the text then do use HTML.

Chapter 16: Episode 4 Part 1

Chapter Notes

A turn of fortune?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gen let out a breath that was half-laugh, half-resigned groan. “Ugh. Fine. You win this round.”

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Francois, watching them both from across the room, adjusted their cuffs with a resigned sort of grace. “If the two of you are finished flirting via historical atrocity comparisons, perhaps we can refocus on the next morally questionable topic of conversation.”

Chrome blinked. “Wait, what kind of flirting—?”

"Right lets put a pin on that! I want to check up on the science lab, I'll be back before the break is over." Senku announced, before strategically retreating.

He needed to think. He almost missed the days where he had 3,700 years of uninterrupted thoughts to himself—because he could really use that right now. A stretch of silence. A loop of logic. No distractions. There was only so much denial a man could hold onto before the data won out. He needed to make a decision.

He made his way toward the lab slowly. Slower than a bride walking down the aisle. Step by reluctant step. It was time to assess the facts.

What was the evidence?

- He was definitely attracted to Gen. His *mind* especially. Which, in and of itself, made Senku feel hot under the collar.
- He didn't *want* a relationship. His brain should be focused on rebuilding civilization, not romance.
- Every hormone in his treasonous body seemed to be actively *fighting* him on that.
- The more time he spent with Gen, the worse it got. Or… stronger.
- He liked Gen's touch.
- He liked the companionship. The teasing. The rhythm of their dynamic.
- Gen was *hot*. That had to be acknowledged at this point.
- He liked flirting back. Liked the reactions it got.
- They were supposed to be "just flirty friends." That clearly wasn't working.
- Literally *everyone* thought they were into each other.

And then there was the most important piece of evidence:

- Gen was *clearly* trying to steer things toward something romantic. Subtle as the small manipulations were, Senku wasn't about to deny that they were there. Which meant *Gen wanted it.* Which meant there were *feelings* involved—more than just his own.

This wasn't some passing crush or random encounter. This was Gen. His partner. His sounding board. The person who shared his mental burdens. The one who understood what it meant to carry the weight of impossible things. The person he was probably going to Hell with. *His Mentalist*

So, where did that leave him?

Two logical options:

Option one: Shut it down. Be firm. Cut it off now and avoid further complications. Sure, it would suck. And yeah, the attraction wouldn't magically disappear. But at least they'd have boundaries. It would keep things "professional." Ish.

The problem? That made him recoil. Could he even go back to just being Gen's friend? Could he ignore the part of himself that wanted the connection—the touch, the teasing, the intimacy? He wasn't sure.

Option two: Accept it. Admit the obvious. That they were headed toward something more whether he liked it or not. Maybe they'd be more effective that way. Maybe it would even

help his focus if they stopped pretending it wasn't happening.

Still made him uncomfortable, though. Relationships weren't exactly in his knowledge base. His only examples were anime, awkward classmates, and his two hopelessly-pining best friends. His old man didn't get into a relationship until Senku wasn't around to observe it. What the hell did *he* know about romance? He knew physics. He knew chemistry. Not how to handle an attraction to a manipulative, brilliant mentalist who'd practically read him like a lab manual.

He sighed, dragging a hand over his face.

Two options. That was it.

Suika and Kaseki were still in the lab when he reached it. The bunk bed was finished—or close to it. Kaseki was putting on the last touches with the kind of glee that would've been unsettling if Senku hadn't known him for so long.

Oh. Right. The bunk bed.

He and Gen were going to be *sharing a room.*

Didn't that just make everything ten billion percent more complicated.

"Senku! I wasn't expecting you yet," Kaseki called, his eyes wide with excitement. "I thought you'd be trapped in that future-viewing madness people keep whispering about! Still sore you didn't invite me, you know—I *live* for stuff like this!"

Senku gave a crooked grin. "You'll get a peek eventually, Master Craftsman. We're still figuring out group rotation."

That was true, technically. Adding more variables wasn't going to make anything easier—but he couldn't deny how much Kaseki *would* enjoy the screen.

"Suika too!" the little detective chimed in.

Senku crouched beside her. "Think about it this way, Suika—if we bring Kaseki in, who's gonna make sure the muscleheads outside don't ruin everything?"

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"We *need* our Great Detective to supervise. Can you honestly trust Magma and Yo to follow directions unsupervised?"

That got her. Her eyes lit up and she bounced on her heels. "Okay! Should I go check on them now?"

"Yup. Report back to me or the Mentalist at the end of each day."

"Mhmm!" And she was off.

There was a moment of quiet before Kaseki spoke again, his tone lower this time. "You, my young friend, look more distracted than usual."

Senku froze.

Great. Wisdom time. He wasn't exactly in the mood for sage advice. But hey. He was a scientist. Might as well test the universe for fun.

"Kaseki, one or two?"

The old man blinked. “One or two…?”

“Just pick.”

“…Two, I suppose. One’s a lonely number.”

Senku squinted.

If he believed in fate, that would’ve been a hell of a sign. But he didn’t. He trusted data. Cold, hard, statistical truth.

Still… since when had he been the kind of guy who ignored what he *wanted*?

“Thanks, old man,” Senku muttered as he drifted toward the workbench. Kaseki said something else, but Senku didn’t hear it. He was already knee-deep in thought, staring into half-finished beakers and avoiding the mental image of one smug, devastatingly sharp-tongued mentalist.

So that was it.

He had his answer.

It wasn’t logical. It didn’t feel safe.

He wanted Gen.

He wasn’t ready to act on it yet. Wasn’t even sure *how* to act on it, not without royally screwing things up. So he’d sit in it for a while. Let the feelings settle. Run the numbers. Analyze what being in a relationship might actually look like—terms, conditions, acceptable emotional boundaries. Did people have rules? Did you talk about feelings regularly? Did that become part of the routine, like brushing your teeth or doing inventory?

Still, if he was going to jump into this, it had to be on *his* terms. Not in a moment of emotional weakness. Not as a reaction to pressure. This would be a mutual project, just like the rest of their work—something built from the ground up. Made easier by Gen taking the lead as he had been, probably. He at least seemed to know where the trip was headed, unlike Senku's admittedly rough floundering.

So... Not now.

But soon.

And with that thought locked safely in the back of his mind, Senku rose from his seat, dusted off his coat, and let out a low breath.

Time to head back. If he stayed away too long, Gen would probably come looking for him anyway. As he approached, he started to hear the yammering voice of the Mentalist, the normality of it did make him relax just a little bit. Maybe he had been right, making a choice was just what he needed in order to make everything run smoother.

“—Which was all part of the plan!” Gen's voice sounded playfully adamant.

“I’m sorry, no.” She sounded unimpressed, “You do *not* get to fall off a tree and say it was part of the strategy.”

“Ah, but that’s the magic of being a mentalist. If you say it with enough confidence, *anything* sounds intentional.”

“That’s not strategy, that’s lying.”

“It’s *presentation!*” Gen retorted, sounding scandalized. “And besides, this is the Kingdom of *Science,* I didn’t *fall*—I tested gravity. Successfully, I might add.”

Chrome snorted.

“Test it again and we’ll see how successful it is when your head hits the deck,” Sound of cracking knuckles.

“So violent.”

He opened the door and stepped in.

Gen turned his head slightly at the sound of him entering and the shift was subtle but instant. His posture didn’t change, but his expression softened just a touch. The banter drained out of his voice, replaced by that relaxed, familiar cadence Senku had come to associate with Gen being genuinely himself. Yet there was something a little off, Senku couldn't put his finger on it.

“Well, if it isn’t our wandering science goblin,” Gen called. “Welcome back to the club house.”

Senku paused in the doorway as he continued to take the Mentalist in.

He had *not* mentally prepared himself to see Gen like *this*—leaning casually on one arm, the sunlight through the window giving his hair a warm halo, his whole expression lit up with easy calm and low-effort charm. There was nothing calculated about it. No games. Just *Gen*, joking with their friends like he belonged there. And for some reason, that made it worse.

Seriously? Now? You’re blushing now?! Who are you, Yuzuriha?!

Senku clenched his jaw, powered through the heat crawling up his neck, and made his way to the bench. He dropped down a few inches away from Gen like it was completely normal and not the most self-disciplined act of restraint he'd performed in days.

"Get bored without me?" Senku asked, after mustering up the ability to say anything.

Gen smiled, "Terribly. I was just about to start talking to myself in your voice."

"Oh god, *don't*," Senku muttered, crossing his arms.

No smirk this time. Just quiet amusement, "I'm glad you're back."

Acting calm took effort. More effort than he liked to admit.

Because inside? He was *anything* but.

Had all the teasing pushed Senku away? Had they hit some invisible line and sent him back behind those reinforced mental walls? The thought irritated Gen more than he wanted to admit. He knew how to walk a fine line—he *excelled* at it—and yet here he was, second-guessing every little glance and interaction. He half wanted to blame Francois for that last little remark, the one that tipped Senku over into full retreat. But he didn't, because that wasn't fair—and more importantly, it wouldn't fix anything. It was just displaced irritation looking for a target.

So he smiled. Teased. Lightened the mood.

Kohaku was an easy mark—she gave as good as she got and didn't ask questions he wasn't ready to answer. They bickered idly about who could throw a rock farther or climb a tree faster, and he leaned into it more than usual. Let it fill the space Senku had left behind.

But the space stayed empty.

Come back already, he thought, not for the first time.

The bench beside him felt colder. The room, too quiet. Even with all the conversation, something felt off-center.

Then the door opened.

Gen's heart did something deeply *inconvenient.*

Senku stepped back into the room.

He didn't look rattled anymore. In fact, he looked... calm. Collected. Gen felt something ease, he found himself relaxing, leaning back. But there was something flickering under the surface —some unfamiliar tension in the way his gaze swept the room before landing squarely on Gen. And then—

That blush.

It crept across his neck and ears like he hadn't noticed it happening, and Gen felt his brain stall for a second. *Interesting.*

Senku blinked like he was seeing Gen for the first time. Froze. Then visibly *scolded* himself in the kind of full-body way that made Gen almost laugh. He marched over. Gen schooled his expression into something pleasantly relaxed Not too teasing. Not too warm. Just... open.

Senku didn’t sit as close as usual, or at least it felt that way. Just a few inches to the side, enough to leave a deliberate pocket of air between them. But he was there.

He was back.

They didn’t say anything right away. Senku stared ahead at the dark screen like it owed him money. Gen kept his posture relaxed, even though his mind was still ticking at a mile a minute. Trying to update assumptions. Running revised theories though his mind. *What changed? What decision got made during that break?*

But he didn’t push.

Finally, Senku spoke, and asking if Gen was bored without him, the answer was, of course, a resounding yes. Which would have been a little bit pathetic to admit outloud, and Gen was most definately not willing to fall to that level unless it was needed for progress and he wasn't really sure where they were on that right now, so inead, he joked.

Gen smiled, “Terribly. I was just about to start talking to myself in your voice.”

“Oh god, *don’t*,” Senku muttered, crossing his arms, it was very Senku, and the sight filled him with a now familar warmth.

“I’m glad you’re back.” Gen admitted, not able to help it.

After a quiet stretch of flickering screen light and background chatter, Senku finally muttered, “Bunk bed’s done.”

Gen blinked. “Mm?”

Senku didn’t turn his head. “Science lab’s set. Kaseki had it mostly finished by the time I got there.”

Ah. So *that's* where he'd gone. Gen waited, sensing more to come.

Sure enough, Senku added, "He asked about the playback. Well—*asked* is generous. He was practically vibrating. I thought he was going to weld his way into the room."

Gen chuckled softly. "Sounds about right."

Senku glanced at him, then looked back at the dark screen. "I've been wondering if we *should* bring him in. He's sharp. And I doubt he'd get overwhelmed by any of it, but… it'd be another variable."

A beat passed. Then, like it wasn't really a question but Senku wanted it to be one, he said, "What do you think, Mentalist?"

Gen tapped his fingers against his knee. "Well, he's not emotionally volatile. Probably wouldn't throw off the group dynamic. And let's be real—he's too useful to leave in the dark forever."

Senku's mouth twitched at the corner. "So that's a vote in favor?"

"Leaning yes," Gen said, watching him sidelong. "And you?"

Senku shrugged, like he hadn't already made up his mind. "Leaning yes."

Of course he was. He just wanted someone else to say it first.

Gen tilted his head with a mock-thoughtful smile. "You're such a tease when you want validation."

Senku clicked his tongue but didn’t deny it. There was none of that usual subtle fluster and Gen found himself a little off-put, wondering what had changed. Then, more quietly, he added, “Told Suika to watch the meatheads for us. She was spying on Ryusui earlier, and I figured it was better to keep her distracted. She doesn’t need to sit through all this.”

Gen’s smile softened. Yeah, this would be a little too much to show a child, no matter how amazing Suika was.

They talked in low tones for the rest of the break, their conversation drifting easily despite the occasional sideways glance from their friends. Senku ignored the looks. So did Gen. That was one of the benefits of knowing each other this well—neither of them had to explain much.

Senku had to admit—*finally* coming to a decision had made things easier. Not perfectly clear, not simple, but… manageable. The constant back-and-forth, the denial, the attempts to logic his way out of it? That had been eating brainpower like a parasite. Now, even with the lingering uncertainty, it felt quieter in his head.

Their dynamic hadn’t broken. If anything, it felt more natural now. The easy cadence of their conversation, the way Gen filled in gaps without Senku needing to elaborate—it all remained intact. Maybe that would shift again the next time Gen decided to test the waters with something flirtatious, but for now?

For now, it was better than before. Although there did seem to be something bothering the Mentalist, it didn't seem to be effecting their banter.

The TV started again as the timer ran down.

These two morons...

> Senku sighed internally as Taiju—face flushed so red he was probably one heartbeat away from passing out—fumbled with a makeshift barrier around the hot spring. Something about modesty or privacy or some other pointless moral concern.

"Ahhh…" Senku interrupted suddenly, causing the playback to pause mid-scene.

Everyone turned toward him, curious. Senku didn't look at them. Instead, he leaned over toward Gen and muttered just loud enough for him to hear, "Remember how we said we'd let them come to the realization themselves and not just *say* it?"

Gen blinked once, then let out a soft, delighted snort. "Seriously, Senku-chan?"

Senku rubbed the back of his neck, looking uncharacteristically sheepish. "Yeah… we're gonna see some fast-tracked progress here."

Across the room, Ukyo raised an eyebrow, clearly amused.

Gen smiled, folding his arms. "So much for subtle manipulation."

"It wasn't even intentional," Senku grumbled under his breath. "That's just how I think. Blame them for being so obvious."

Chrome leaned toward Kohaku, whispering, "Do you think they're talking about Taiju and Yuzuriha?"

Kohaku stared at the paused screen, then glanced at the two boys currently whispering like a pair of smug conspirators on the bench. Those two definitely deserved each other—but more importantly, she really hoped those slimmy schemers were talking about Taiju and Yuzuriha. Because if that meant she was finally going to get *some* progress there, then great. It was long overdue. Still… she found herself getting a little too invested in seeing *Senku and Gen* figure their shit out too.

How that pairing worked, she didn't even know. Taiju and Yuzuriha acted like people in love. Senku and Gen acted like... something else. Something complicated and smug, and teasing that could get a little mean, even though the other never seemed like they minded.

Kohaku narrowed her eyes and pointed toward the scientist and the mentalist. "I think *they* might be the real mystery."

> Not that Senku particularly wanted to *see* them together. Especially not now, with the world reduced to a few square kilometers of civilization and their little group being the only population in sight. He didn't need to witness their awkward stumbles toward romance or their inevitable, nauseating public displays of affection. Still... the clumsy denial routine was arguably worse.

The two in question were bright red, frozen like startled animals. Taiju was stuttering something that didn't resemble any known language, steam practically pouring from his ears like a kettle left on boil. Yuzuriha had her hands clutched over her mouth and looked one breath away from passing out.

No one said anything at first—not even Gen. Which was honestly saying something.

Even Kohaku, who looked like she was physically vibrating with unspoken commentary, glanced at them, paused, and wisely chose silence. Chrome made a tiny wheezing sound like he was trying not to laugh, while Ryusui leaned back with a grin that said he was deeply entertained but at least had the decency not to make it worse. Yet.

It was Yuzuriha who broke first. She let out a tiny, desperate noise. "Please," She squeaked, face buried in her hands, "Let's just get this over with…"

Senku leaned back in his seat, arms crossed, and muttered, "They're gonna die of secondhand embarrassment before we ever reach the Stone Wars, fuck, the next minute of footage even."

Gen, mouth twitching, leaned in just enough to whisper, “That’s what happens when someone narrates their suppressed sexual tension for them.”

“I didn’t *mean* to,” Senku hissed. “It was just a thought!”

“Mmhm, but at least we are making progress~!” Gen was smiling way too smugly for someone trying to help.

> Rolling his eyes, Senku turned away from the idiocy and focused on something far more productive: material collection.
>
> Now *this* was worth his time.
>
> His grin stretched wide—sharp, unfiltered, and unmistakably gleeful. This place was *stacked*. Sulfur deposits, iron pyrite, even trace volcanic minerals just *waiting* to be harvested. His hands moved fast, practically vibrating with anticipation as he crouched near a jagged outcrop, eyes gleaming.
>
> “Oho~,” he muttered to himself, voice full of manic delight.

Oh, screw Taiju and Yuzuriha’s progress—Senku didn’t even realize how distracting he was, did he?

Gen had always known the scientist was cute when he got into his element, but this was downright unfair. That gremlin grin, the way he crouched with manic glee over sulfur deposits like he was discovering buried treasure—Gen’s heart did a little involuntary flutter, and he had to physically look away before he got caught staring like a schoolgirl with a forbidden crush. He almost wished that he was Sapiosexual, that way he wouldn't find something like THIS so attractive.

He could make a quip. A little flirtatious something, light and sharp-edged, just to see how Senku reacted.

But…

Gen’s smile tightened slightly.

No. Not right now. Not after earlier. Senku was likely still adjusting. Manipulating emotional tension was fun, sure, but not when it might push the scientist right back behind the walls they’d worked so hard to chip away. So instead, he let the teasing line die unspoken and turned his attention to the other two idiots in the room. Taiju still looked like a tomato on the verge of spontaneous combustion. Yuzuriha was refusing to make eye contact, muttering under her breath like a curse would save her.

Cute, really. Endearing. Though not quite as cute as Senku-chan, admittedly.

Gen smiled faintly and leaned his cheek against one hand, watching them squirm. Maybe letting *them* take the attention for a while wasn’t so bad. Just this once.

> Twisting her hair into a bun and carefully tucking the ends beneath the knot, Yuzuriha finally eased into the water. The heat soaked into her muscles, chased the tension from her shoulders. Taiju had gone out of his way to make sure everything was set up properly, even building a barrier to give them both privacy. He was always so careful—so respectful.
>
> She really was lucky to have him.

“Eep!” Yuzuriha squeaked, jolting slightly as her on-screen self sank into the water. It wasn’t like they showed anything inappropriate—thank goodness—but knowing her thoughts were going to be exposed next? That was almost worse.

Across the room, Taiju erupted.

“SENKU! HOW DARE YOU SHOW YUZURIHA LIKE THIS ON THE SCREEN!”

Yuzuriha’s hands flew up to her face, already flushed pink. Oh no.

Senku groaned, dragging a hand down his face like he was physically in pain. “Listen, you absolute moron—do you seriously think I’d risk your outrage if it wasn’t ten billion percent necessary? Try using your brain for once. There’s *nothing* showing. The whole reason it’s framed like this is *because* I predicted you’d lose your mind otherwise.”

He shot her a quick look, not unkind. “She’s my friend too. I’m not in the business of embarrassing her for no reason. That wouldn’t make a single millimeter of sense.”

“N-Not a thing showing?!” Taiju spluttered, pointing a dramatic, shaky finger at Senku like he was announcing a criminal verdict. “And *you* call *me* the idiot?! NOBODY LOOK AT THE SCREEN! YUZURIHA DESERVES HER PRIVACY!”

“I-It’s okay, Taiju!” Yuzuriha stammered, flustered beyond measure but desperate to calm him down before he combusted. “Senku’s right. The water’s hiding… everything important. It’s fine.”

She really did appreciate his protectiveness. It made her feel safe, cared for. But as her thoughts on-screen continued to hover just beneath the surface—ready to betray her emotional state at any moment—she wished she could trade this blush for a blackout.

“Haha! There’s nothing to worry about,” he declared, grinning like this was the most casual comment in the world. “Yuzuriha’s a *fine*-looking woman!”

The room went dead silent.

Even Gen blinked. Chrome physically recoiled. Kohaku stared at him like he’d just committed a war crime. Francois looked vaguely like they were calculating how long it would take to strangle him with a dishcloth.

Senku didn’t even flinch—just muttered under his breath, “Of *course* that’s your takeaway.”

Yuzuriha, face crimson, let out a strangled noise that might have been her soul leaving her body.

But it was Taiju who truly delivered.

“OH MY GOD, YOU AGREE, RIGHT?!” He burst out with total sincerity—then froze, blinking in horror. “WAIT, NO! I MEAN—YES, BUT—DON’T LOOK!”

Ryusui just laughed louder, utterly unbothered.

Gen wheezed into his sleeve.

But before Ryusui could toss back a response, a strong hand latched onto his collar and yanked him backward with startling force.

“Wha—?!”

Kohaku dragged him off to the side, away from the rest of the group, and leaned in close. Very close. Her voice was low but deadly serious, “Listen to me. Those two are clearly meant to end up together. If you ruin this—if you make them put this realization off—you will be personally responsible for delaying what *every single person* here has been waiting for. Do you understand?”

Ryusui blinked, stunned. “Wait, are you—?”

“Shhh.” She clapped a hand over his mouth. “They need time. Let them get there themselves. If you mess it up, I will toss you into a freezing river and claim it was for training. Got it?”

She pulled back just enough to raise an eyebrow.

Ryusui gave a tiny, baffled nod.

“Good.” She released him and returned to her seat like nothing had happened.

“...I didn’t even *do* anything,” Ryusui muttered under his breath, rubbing his neck. But he stayed quiet after that.

Francois raised a brow in mild amusement. “How diplomatic,” They murmured.

Gen leaned over to Senku, eyes glinting. Lip reading was quite the skill and it really did get him a lot of delicious tea, “Kohaku might be my new favorite person.”

“Tch. Don’t let her hear that,” Senku muttered.

> The warmth wrapped around her like a blanket, and she couldn’t help but think of the boys, who’d gone without hot water for months now. It must feel incredible for them too.
>
> “Yuzuriha,” Taiju called from the other side of the barrier, his voice uncharacteristically serious, “I think I should tell you about what happened… that day, long ago.”
>
> Her breath caught.
>
> “That day, when I asked you to meet me at the camphor tree...”
>
> Heat bloomed across her face, far hotter than the bathwater. Her heart thudded violently in her chest, almost too fast to process, and under the surface her fingers trembled like they were cold—even though the water was anything but. She wanted to know. *Needed* to know. She tried to keep her voice even, but it came out shaky anyway. “Well… Taiju? You wanted to tell me something back then. What was it?”

Senku resisted the urge to drag a hand down his face. Okay, this was definitely getting awkwardly personal. Watching his two oldest friends flirt around a conversation they'd been avoiding for literal millennia? It was somehow worse than their usual quiet pining. At least then it was easy to ignore. Now it was center stage—on a giant glowing screen, no less.

Across the room, Kohaku was practically vibrating, leaning forward with wide eyes like the next line of dialogue might unlock the secrets of the universe. Chrome shot her a look of utter disbelief. Honestly, she was reminding him more and more of the Sparkle Sisters. He didn't know whether to be amused or concerned.

Taiju looked like someone had just asked him to defuse a bomb. Frozen, red-faced, visibly floundering—Senku had never seen his usually straightforward friend this stuck for words. It was almost impressive.

Yuzuriha had her eyes fixed on her lap, legs crossed and held brought inward, thumbs fiddling nervously against each other, the fabric of her skirt pulled taut between her balled up fists.

Senku glanced over to Gen, and found him studying his oldest friends with sharp eyes.

"Anything interesting, Mentalist?" Practically inviting that lecturing tone that Senku found himself liking so much, fingers crossed for a lecture of some sort of psychological principle., or even Mentalism. The way that Yuzuriha had hunched over protectively looked like a defensive posture to him, a bunch of signs of closed off body language that Gen would love to chitter on about, (He had in his books, after all) and Senku would love the distraction of listening to *that* over watching his friends flounder.

He didn't get more than a shrug in response.

Senku narrowed his eyes.

> There was a pause—too long—and then his voice, still firm but uncertain: "Yuzuriha… For the entire time I was a statue, all I thought about was finishing what I started to say. But things have changed—"
>
> Her gaze dropped to the water. So he wasn't going to say it. Had she been wrong?
>
> "Now, in this crazy Stone World, with nowhere to run to… I just wouldn't feel right, as a man, saying it now."

"You can't be serious!" Kohaku snapped, fists clenched at her sides, looking like she was two seconds away from ripping out her own hair in sheer frustration.

Gen understood where Taiju was coming from. Back then—when it was just the three of them and a literal murderer on their heels—trying to confess would've put Yuzuriha in an incredibly uncomfortable position. It was considerate. Too considerate. But that had been *months* ago. Things were different now. They had over a hundred people, countless places to go if someone needed space. There was no longer a practical reason to hold back. Not anymore.

Still, Gen supposed it was just like Taiju to hesitate until he'd emotionally cleared every possible moral hurdle first.

"Y-Yuzuriha…" Taiju stammered, then swallowed hard, straightening up with a rare seriousness on his face. "Would you come talk to me in the hallway, please?"

Gen smiled, quietly impressed. That drive. That earnest, overwhelming sincerity—it wasn't just admirable, it was almost inhuman.

Yuzuriha, still flushed red and clearly caught off guard, gave a small, wobbly smile and nodded. "Mhmm."

They stepped out together.

The door clicked shut behind them.

"Finally," Senku muttered under his breath, the word echoing around the now silent room.

Kohaku turned immediately—like a hawk spotting prey—locking eyes with Ukyo, her expression wild with anticipation. Ukyo instinctively leaned back in his seat like a man

suddenly realizing he was in the crosshairs of a predator looking to use his ears for evil.

It was quiet in the hallway.

Yuzuriha shifted slightly, fingers laced together, trying not to fidget. It was hard to look directly at Taiju—but she made herself do it. He looked flushed, nervous, but beneath the red cheeks was that familiar spark of determination she'd always found so compelling.

"S-So, um… things are different now," Taiju began awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. "We've rebuilt a lot, and I guess… I feel more comfortable explaining now."

He found his stride partway through, the stammer fading. His voice steadied. The blush eased off. And suddenly, there was nothing but sincerity in his expression as he leaned in—not too close, but just enough that Yuzuriha's breath caught in her throat. Her chest tightened with warmth and anticipation.

He was really going to say it.

Finally.

"For thousands of years, Yuzuriha… there was nothing but you on my mind," he said, voice clear. "You kept me going through all of it. Through petrification, through waking up in a broken world—you were always there in my thoughts. And now, even more than ever, you mean everything to me. You're strong and creative and thoughtful and… and honestly one of the most amazing people I've ever met."

He took a breath—and then rushed the rest in one big burst:

"So I was wondering—would you want to go on a date with me?"

His voice echoed just a little too loudly off the hallway walls. The people in the reaction room probably heard every word, but Yuzuriha couldn't bring herself to care.

She nodded.

Then nodded again.

And again, smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. "Mhmm! Yes! I'd really like that!"

They stared at each other for a beat.

Both blushed a shade of red that would've made Senku take notes for future paint development.

"Great! So, uh… doesn't this make you my g-girlfri—"

"Yes!" she cut in, half-laughing, half-overwhelmed, before stepping forward and pulling him into a hug. It was warm… *too* warm—like excitement, but sharper. More electric. Kind of like falling and flying at the same time, that fluttering feeling that tugged at your stomach… but higher. Her heart felt too big for her body. She could feel the moment Taiju froze, standing a little too straight, too stiff—before he relaxed and carefully, shyly, wrapped his arms around her in return.

That thoughtfulness, that carefulness—that was why she liked him so much.

Finally.

It had taken so long. But this… this was worth every second.

Even if her face felt like it was about to explode.

Even if her hug was just a little too tight.

She wouldn't change a thing.

Senku half wanted to rush out there and drag them back in after the five-minute mark. How long did confessing your feelings take, exactly? They were on a bit of a time crunch here. He fought the urge to roll his eyes, tapping his fingers to the beat of the passing seconds. As they crept toward the ten-minute mark, his irritation started to spike. What were they doing out there? Making out or something? That could wait. Science came first.

When they finally returned—flushed, holding hands—Senku arched a brow.

Kohaku let out a whooping cheer loud enough to pierce the heavens, and Senku stuck a finger in his ear like it might muffle her shriek. Overreactive fangirl behavior, absolutely—but still. He couldn't help the tiny smile that tugged at the corner of his mouth.

They deserved it.

"Haha! Congratulations!" Ryusui called out, grinning without shame of his overly loud exclamation.

Both Taiju and Yuzuriha blushed deeper, visibly flustered. Senku noticed how their hands tightened around each other.

He hummed quietly. Not his style. Holding hands in public like that? It was all a little *too* sweet for him. Then again… hadn't he grabbed the Mentalist's hand just earlier today? This did give him a good chance to observe relationship behaviors though, which is something he had been sorely lacking. That made these two finally making progress even better for him.

"This is quite pleasing," Francois said, voice measured as ever—but there was a noticeable softness in their eyes. "I am happy for the both of you."

Senku rolled his eyes—just a little—and muttered, his tone softer than he meant it to be, "About time. I can't think of two idiots who deserve each other more."

The two sat down, closer than before, hands still brushing even as they settled. It gave Senku the sudden, annoying urge to scoot a little closer to the Mentalist. Which was ridiculous. They were already pretty close, though he did mentally note the urge to think about later.

It was frustrating. But it was so *like* him.

Still… maybe that was okay.

She smiled faintly, fingers interlacing under the water.

I guess… this is fine. It can wait.

"I—I'm sorry!" Taiju's voice wavered. "I realize that this is—"

"No. It's okay. I understand," she said gently, before he could finish. "It's okay. We can wait."

She looked up, and the steam curled around her face like a soft shield.

"All three of us will work hard. We'll bring civilization back—I'm sure of it."

Gen watched the screen with a softened expression, arms loosely folded in front of him as the scene played out. Despite the surge of tension a few moments ago, Yuzuriha handled it with the grace of someone twice her age. Honestly, it was kind of impressive. There was no blame in her voice, no flustered demand for answers, no insecurity—just calm understanding and that quiet optimism she always seemed to carry like a second skin.

Mature, poised… and probably the most emotionally stable person in the room right now. Definitely compared to Gen, who was feeling more and more off-balance by the minute.

He wasn't sure what to do with his own feelings right now—still off-footed by the way Senku had retreated earlier, and unsure whether to keep pushing, to make contact again, or to leave everything alone before the entire plan broke apart in his hands. Senku wasn't making it any easier. Gen knew that if he glanced over and tried to get a proper read, he might get an answer... but he was scared of what that answer might be. He couldn't bring himself to study his partner just yet.

Still, he cast a glance sideways—half a second, if not less.

Senku still had that somewhat soft look on his face, a rare flicker of genuine happiness as he watched their friends. It made something twist in Gen's chest.

Across the room, Chrome finally broke the silence, leaning forward in disbelief. "Whoa… Yuzuriha's amazing. She just, like… said it's fine? And she meant it?"

"Some people," Gen murmured, "actually know how to regulate emotions. Shocking, I know."

Chrome grinned and nodded. "No, seriously! That kind of patience? I don't think I could pull that off."

> Senku woke at dawn. By the time the two lovebirds were finally stirring, he'd already gathered most of what they needed. When they finally woke up Senku placed the heavy ingredients at the ground and laughed. The morality of what he was about to do? Better not to dwell on it. He'd made rocket fuel before. Explosives were also nothing new.
>
> This was just another step forward.

Put on a smile. An act. Nothing is wrong. You aren't uncertain.

"Is that how you justify creating explosives, Senku-chan? What an interesting mind you have," Gen purred, smooth as ever.

But those sharp red eyes narrowed in response—just slightly, but enough to make Gen's stomach tighten. That look was too focused. Too precise. He thought his act was airtight, but it felt like Senku was clocking something beneath the surface.

Was he?

Gen wasn't sure he wanted to look too closely. He was still scared of what he might find and —

"I'm more than willing to continue our little case study tonight, if you want, Mentalist."

Senku didn't purr his words, he never did. He wasn't teasing. His tone was pitched lower than usual, grounded. Hot, really. Those red eyes softened from suspicion into something slower… warmer. Almost heated.

They were okay then?

Right?

"Oh my god, you two slimy schemers better stop looking at each other like that! We *just* got these two together—don't steal the spotlight!" Kohaku barked.

Gen's breath caught. His body went still, eyes darting toward Senku—*would he bolt again?* Like he did when Francois had outed them too blatantly? Would he flinch and retreat? But Senku only scoffed and leaned back in their shared bench, completely unbothered. No fluster. No retreat. Which… might not be a good thing. Because if Senku had figured out how to *actually* do this "friends who flirt" thing while he'd been off alone, then maybe Gen's careful work—the slow build, the layered pushes—wasn't necessary anymore.

Just because Senku was still willing to give him those looks didn’t mean the spark Gen had been carefully cultivating was still there.

And that was the part that worried him.

> “We now have the three components we need to make gunpowder,” He declared, smirking.
>
> Taiju perked up instantly. “For real?! We already got all of ’em?”
>
> Senku grinned—wide, crooked, just a little bit evil. “All that’s left is to mix it up. Time for a gunpowder cooking class that'll be a total blast.”
>
> He pointed to each item with the flair of a deranged science teacher. “First, sulfur. Plenty of it around here in the hot spring gases. Second, charcoal—easy. Just burn some wood. The third’s the tricky one: potassium nitrate. It takes forever to make properly, so…” Senku reached into his pouch and held up a sealed bag of white crystals with a wink. “I made a big batch ahead of time to save us some precious hours.”

“Hey, no fair! You can’t skip over the cool science stuff like that!” Chrome practically yelled, pointing at the screen.

Senku didn’t even look up at first, just grinned as his past self held up the finished bag of powder on the screen. “Tch. I knew you’d say that.”

He folded his arms and tilted his head slightly toward the image. “What you’re seeing here is purified potassium nitrate—one of the key ingredients in black powder. Looks clean now, right? White and crystalized? But that’s after the dirty work.” As he said dirty work, the grin on his face grew into a full on smirk.

Chrome leaned forward, eyes sparkling. “Wait—*that* came out of our world? How'd you do it? What do you mean dirty work?”

Senku smirked. “First you need a nitrary. These are usually dug out compost—mostly rot, old animal droppings, decayed plant matter. Anything nitrogen-rich. Obviously we had that already in the cave with the bat guano, our main source of nitric acid. Let it all fester for a while to let nature do its thing.”

Kohaku wrinkled her nose. “Ugh. I still find it gross that is what is in the revival fluid.”

“Once the bacteria break down the waste, they convert the ammonia into nitrates. You leach the nitrates out with water. What you get is this gross brown slush.” Senku snickered, "I ten billion percent don't suggest you think about drinking that."

"Like we want to hear that from someone who tasted battery acid," Gen commented, looking amused.

Senku waved the comment away and refocused attention by pointing at the screen again, where the bag glinted in the light. “But then you filter it until it’s not disgusting anymore. Then boil that down, concentrate it, and when it cools? Crystals form. Dry those out and boom. That’s the white powder you’re seeing now.”

Chrome’s jaw dropped. “So cool…”

“And for the record,” Senku added with a little shrug, “I would’ve *preferred* to use more modern methods—hell of a lot faster and cleaner—but we didn’t have the tech for that yet. Needed better distillation gear, electrical arcs, high-temp catalysts... we weren’t even close. So I had to go old school.”

“Hah. Of course you were already thinking about the *next* method,” Gen said dryly, but with a flicker of genuine amusement.

Ryusui crossed his arms, grinning. “Well, old school or not, you made it work. That’s what counts.”

“Damn right I did.” Senku looked a little too smug.

> Taiju blinked. “Wait… nitrate… That’s the stuff from before, right?” When it clicked, he jumped. “AHHHH! Nitric acid! The miracle fluid!”
>
> Senku smirked. “Surprisingly correct, simpleton. Ten billion points.”
>
> He poured the ingredients into a fresh pouch and grabbed a stick. “Now we mix. And to sweeten the batch, we’ll add a pinch of sugar. Or rather—some glucose I extracted from grapes. Should do the trick.”

“Why add the glucose?” Chrome asked, eyes narrowed in fascination as he leaned toward the screen. He looked like he might try to take notes with a rock if someone handed him one.

Senku nodded slightly, arms crossed as he watched his past self stir the mixture. “Black powder doesn't technically need it... But... It can act as a fuel source. A little sugar gives the reaction an extra kick. More energy, faster combustion.”

“Basically,” Gen added lazily from beside him, “It turns the boom into a bigger boom.”

“That’s the simplified version, yeah,” Senku muttered, amused by Gen's additions. He pointed at the playback. “It’s just glucose. Grapes are packed with it, so I extracted some earlier—pure enough to use here.”

“Wait, so you were planning for this even *before* we left the camp?” Taiju asked, sounding amazed again.

“Ten billion percent,” Senku said, casually. “I’ve had this on the to-do list since the moment Tsukasa showed his hand.”

Chrome whistled, thoroughly impressed. “Man, no offense, but it’s kinda scary how far ahead you plan things.”

Senku smirked. “It's even more impressive when the Mentalist plans things, glad that I don't have to do that anymore."

This plan had been a long time coming. Ever since Tsukasa’s revival, Senku had prepared for the worst. He’d had time. Resources. Contingency after contingency.

“Finally—pack it solid,” He said, lifting a thick wooden stump.

“Need pounding done, Senku? Sounds like the perfect job for me!” Taiju offered, hefting a massive stone.

Yuzuriha rushed in with wide eyes. “Wait! Are you sure that’s safe? What if it sparks and blows up?!”

Senku raised an eyebrow. “Nah. Stone-on-stone doesn’t spark. Flint does, because it’s metallic. But this? This is safe. Taiju’s ten billion percent our best bet to compress it the quickest with his ridiculous strength.”

He stepped back to let Taiju take over. But even as he spoke, a realization crept in.

Hot springs... volcanic minerals... iron deposits...

Iron pyrite... Especially with the Glucose added in...

Senku’s eyes widened. “Wait—!”

“Oh no,” Gen muttered, his smile dropping. His hand twitched with a want to grab Senku's that he wasn't sure would be appreciated right now, “That’s not a good ‘wait.’ That’s a *someone’s-about-to-lose-a-limb* kind of wait.”

Chrome visibly stiffened. “Wait—what was it?! What did he realize?! Was it the iron pyrite?!”

“Bingo,” Senku muttered, running a hand through his hair. “Didn’t think it through fast enough. Glucose changes the chemical behavior just enough for it to ignite faster, plus with Taiju's crazy strength and pyrite being int he area I didn't account for the potential sparks from him choosing to use that to pound the mixture. Ten billion percent should have stuck with the wood stump I had been planning to use.”

Taiju was already bringing down a boulder at the full force of his abilities.

The sack immediately started sparking as the reaction started to form. Used to Senku's experiments exploding, and knowing how to predict it based off Senku's reactions, his two friends joined him in running away as their gun powder created a boom, thankfully they were far enough away that all they did was stumble a bit.

When the smoke cleared, Senku was already grinning, heart pounding in his chest, “No problem. That just means the experiment was a success.”

"It's lucky those two knew you so well, or you could've all been seriously injured," Francois noted, their tone carrying a faint edge of disapproval. It was subtle—but sharp enough to make Ryusui wince. He didn’t hear that tone often, but when he did, it always landed.

Senku just huffed a laugh, flashing a grin. “That was never gonna be a problem with these two. They know exactly how to follow my lead when it comes to this kind of thing. Or did you forget the explosive dodgeball incident that our crafting queen brought up? That was only the beginning. We’ve got *tons* more examples. They’re ten billion percent used to it. No luck involved.”

Ukyo shook his head slowly, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “That grin right after the explosion… I don’t think I’ve ever seen you match the ‘mad scientist’ stereotype more.”

Gen raised an eyebrow. “Really? That was the peak?”

Ukyo considered it for a beat… then nodded. “Okay. Maybe not the peak. But it’s *up there*.”

Senku didn’t even try to look ashamed.

"That's scary stuff, we need to be careful!"

“Damn right we do,” Senku agreed, tone suddenly flat. “This is a lethal substance. Kids have lost limbs to this stuff in amateur experiments. One mistake, and you’re gone.”

Yuzuriha’s voice was quieter. “And… we’re going to use it against Tsukasa?”

Senku’s grin faded, replaced with something more measured.

"In a way. Tsukasa's not mindless—he can be reasoned with. This gives us leverage. A bargaining chip."

But not for me, he thought, gaze dropping slightly. Tsukasa would never let *him* live. Not when Senku represented everything Tsukasa wanted to destroy. He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling their eyes on him.

It wouldn't be long now. That explosion definitely moved up the timeline.

Playback resumes in fifteen minutes

"While I can appreciate an impressively planned bargain," Gen whispered, tone conspiratorial even as worry tightened his throat, "You're not the strategist anymore. Leave that to me, dear."

Not that anyone else would've noticed the strain in his voice—he was too good for that.

Senku narrowed his eyes.

Gen blinked as an ankle pressed firmly against his own. Was this their first real touch since Senku had come back? It was reassuring. Or—it should've been. Except it also meant his act wasn't holding up nearly as well as he'd thought. Senku had seen through him that easily? When did he get so subpar? He felt a twinge of embarrassment—not just as a showman, but as a mentalist.

Before he could recover and conjure up some biting comeback, Taiju cut in, raising one finger with an almost threatening jab—though his other hand remained firmly clasped in Yuzuriha's. "You better not get any more *crazy* ideas like that again, Senku! I mean, the normal Senku-crazy ideas are fine—but not *that* one!"

Gen glanced over, watching as Yuzuriha's thumb gently traced across Taiju's knuckles. The man visibly deflated, instantly soothed.

Senku, beside him, raised a hand to shield his mouth from view and turned toward Gen, mock-gagging at the sweetness.

Gen grinned behind his sleeve, barely stifling a laugh.

Yeah. This was better.

Something was up with the Mentalist.

He wasn’t acting as well as he usually did, and the timing of that was *incredibly* inconvenient—because Senku had *just* decided he was going to stop fighting the possibility of a relationship. It wasn't like Senku had frame of reference, this should have been the Mentalist continuing to guide. And now, suddenly, Gen was pulling back? Playing coy? Acting like he hadn’t spent the last few days *carefully and strategically* manipulating Senku’s emotional responses, flirting just subtly enough to get him thinking, and setting the groundwork for this exact moment?

Oh *no*.

He did *not* get to do that.

After everything the Mentalist had done to bring him to this point? He was going to slow down? Slow down when the Mentalist should be speeding up?

Fine.

If Gen wanted to play it that way, then Senku would do what he always did—adjust the variables. Turn the situation into an equation he could control. All he had to do was flip the script. A little subtle pressure, a little calculated ambiguity. Make the *Mentalist* crack first.

Wasn’t that flirting, anyway? The literal definition was to behave in a way that attracted someone. And if he played this right—if he turned it into a game?

Then Gen would figure it out, and Gen would LIKE this type of game.

Oh, it was going to be ten billion percent exhilarating.

Chapter End Notes

Chrome really be asking shit that is hard as fuck to answer like BRO IM NOT ACTUALLY SENKU I could find nothing readily available that explained adding glucose to the mixture that Senku uses, Mecha Senku says this shit legit but Wikipedia doesn't tell me shit and I got no textbook on this one. This was frustrating for me and the most time consuming part of the chapter.

How are we feeling on our relationship progresss???? For me personally it feels fast but that's mostly because it was so slow during the interlude chapters because those weren't really 'planned' in my outline.

I love my boy Taiju and girl Yuzuriha, they are so cute and I hope I did them justice cuz they deserve it.

LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THOUGHT! Thank you guys al so much for the super so far I truly appreciate it.

Chapter 17: Episode 4 Part 2

Chapter by orphan_account

Chapter Notes

Sorry am a little late, I'm sick. Also its a little shorter than usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Senku wasn't exactly good at this type of thing. How were you supposed to make someone act on their feelings for you, anyway? That was definitely the Mentalist's wheelhouse. Fortunately enough, Gen had already given him the answer with his own behavior: increase points of contact, flirt utterly shamelessly, keep applying pressure until the other person gave in. Simple. Efficient. No need for extraneous nonsense—that would just slow the process down.

Judging by the time left on the playback, they'd be heading to sleep after this last stretch or so. Which meant being alone with the Mentalist. In the lab.

Senku grinned, wide and unrepentant.

"What an evil look, Senku-chan~," Gen teased, half-laughing, half-nervous.

Senku only grinned deeper, shifting fully to face him. The Mentalist flinched back slightly—just a fraction. Unacceptable.

Without missing a beat, Senku moved a little bit closer, reclaiming the distance Gen had tried to put between them.

Just admitting it wasn't enough. No—he wanted Gen to act on his feelings. He wanted to make Gen... Hmm. He wanted to make Gen kiss him. The thought made him feel kind of warm, which was interesting. More logically however, there was other reasonings. It was the

clearest declaration possible. Even a shameless schemer like Gen wouldn’t cross that line without knowing exactly what he wanted. Without understanding that they weren’t playing anymore—they were choosing. If Gen kissed him first, it would settle it. The tension, the uncertainty, all of it. It would be a move Gen couldn’t take back, couldn’t explain away.

And until then? Everything else was still on the table. He could flirt shamelessly. He could press their legs together under the table, brush his fingers over Gen’s wrist, crowd him a little closer whenever they spoke in low voices. So long as he didn’t kiss him, it was all still "just a game." Just flirting, and they did already have a prior agreement for that.

He couldn't wait to see Gen break.

Senku grinned wider, feeling the adrenaline simmer low and bright under his skin.

Ten billion percent exhilarating.

Senku shook the thought away, stretching lazily as he pushed to his feet. Across the room, the others were already starting to drift back—Ukyo with a fresh cup of tea, Kohaku stealing a seat that definitely hadn’t been hers before, Ryusui laughing uproaringly broken by snapped fingers as he talked to Francois. But it was Taiju and Yuzuriha who caught Senku’s attention, hovering a little closer than before, talking in low voices that somehow seemed even softer than usual.

Taiju ducked his head shyly at something Yuzuriha said, his ears going pink, while Yuzuriha only laughed, covering her mouth like she couldn't help it.

It was... cute. So that's what that sort of romantic relationships looked like from the outside. It was interesting, he would keep an eye out for them and hopefully learn more things that he could apply in his plans with Gen. Already the idea of saying something into the Mentalist's ear like that seemed like it would be a good idea.

At his side, Gen shifted slightly, just enough that Senku caught the faint tension in his posture—the tightness around his mouth, the way his hand hesitated before resting lightly on the cushion between them.

It was strange, seeing Gen like this. Hesitant. Uncertain.

Wrong, somehow.

Senku didn't let himself think twice. He shifted just enough to bump his knee against Gen’s deliberate, steady, and left the contact there without apology. This was a step up from ankles, right? Gen would probably understand the progression.

Let the games begin

Playback resumed

> He and Taiju worked diligently to put out the fire, pouring buckets of hot spring water over the smoldering remains of their little mishap. At least putting out the fire would stop Tsukasa from being able to pinpoint them as easily—save them at least a little bit of time.
>
> "Alright, just a little more and it'll be out," Taiju said, still hauling large amounts of water to the fire, though not exactly using that water efficiently, splashing it every which way in his enthusiasm.

"Jesus, Taiju," Ryusui said, arms crossed and chin up, amused, "You're supposed to *put out* the fire, not start a flood!"

Ukyo gave a soft chuckle, sipping his tea, he really was the picture perfect old man of the group. Senku missed a lot of things from the modern world, but seeing people drink any sort of tea made him miss boba. They would bring it all back, eventually.

Kohaku squinted at the screen, unimpressed. "You could have just aimed better."

"I was trying!!" Taiju said, throwing his arms up in real life too, nearly sloshing the cup of water he had somehow acquired during the break. "There was so much pressure!"

Pressure? Senku thought to himself and tried to keep his laugh in his throat. Taiju was just too funny sometimes. That was pressure inducing? They had brought bombs to school, things that were objectively more dangerous, and yet somehow putting out a fire was what was bringing him pressure? He had no frame of reference.

"If Tsukasa's after us, there's still a ten billion percent chance he'll find us," Senku muttered, shaking his head slightly.

"Hey, Senku, Taiju?" Yuzuriha called, her voice unusually wobbly—nervous in a way that Senku had never heard from her before. He immediately turned toward the direction she was looking, sharp instincts kicking in, and what caught his eye shouldn't have been possible.

No—ten billion percent unlikely—but not impossible.

It was jarring to see. Senku suddenly looking genuinely rattled. Not just calculating. Not just alert. Worried. Shocked. Almost...off-balance. Gen narrowed his eyes slightly, heart giving a small, unsettled twist. *What the hell could get Senku of all people looking like that? It wasn't Tsukasa, Senku had been planning for him the whole time.*

From her spot across the room, she watched the whole thing unfold with sharp eyes—and when she caught the flicker of real worry cross Gen’s face, her grin only widened. She had a pretty good idea of what had caused the onscreen panic, considering her own plan to start the fire in response. She hadn't meant to put Senku in a worse position, but she didn't regret it considering it ended up with them meeting and all the amazing things that had come from the creation of the Kingdom of Science.

Before she turned her attention back to the TV, her eyes accidently landed on Senku's partner. Gen, who was tense. Her eyes were sharp enough to tell her that, normally Gen hide things a lot better. He must have been really worried. Kohaku leaned back in her seat, arms folding loosely across her chest as she considered it. Taiju and Yuzuriha were finally together now, fumbling through their feelings and being completely obvious about it.

Which meant it was officially open season for the next set of idiots to figure themselves out. Honestly, they made perfect sense together, Kohaku could admit. She could feel a grin wanting to come to her face. Senku needed someone who could keep up with him. Gen

needed someone who wouldn’t let him get away with pretending he didn’t care. They were halfway there already.

> He stared, blinking once, then again, but it was still there, rising steadily into the sky. A smoke signal. It was possible that someone else had gotten revived before him, but the chances of meeting all the right conditions to survive were astronomically low. Almost not even worth calculating. But still, there it was, right in front of his eyes.
>
> "Is it Tsukasa?" Yuzuriha asked hurriedly, stepping closer.
>
> "No, he's in the opposite direction, and he has got absolutely no reason to reveal his location like that." Senku answered, but his thoughts were focused far more on what was in front of him.

Gen finally let himself exhale a little. Kohaku's response, her body language, had been telling. It was definitely that female gorilla that started that fire. And just like that, the knot in his chest loosened.

Out of the corner of his eye, Senku caught the way Gen’s shoulders relaxed, the way he leaned back ever so slightly, tension bleeding out of him now that the immediate panic had passed. Senku’s knee was still pressed lightly against his a quiet point of contact that hadn’t shifted, hadn’t pulled away. It was weirdly... reassuring. Weird enough that before he could stop himself, Senku shifted closer, dipping his head low enough to murmur near Gen’s ear:

"Awwwh. Were you worried for me?"

It came out half-sarcastic, half-awkward, the tone almost too soft—but by then it was too late to walk it back. Better to just approach it as confidently as possible.

Gen blinked, startled, feeling the way the words hit him low in the chest—unexpectedly warm, stupidly real. It caught him off guard, enough that for half a second he just... grinned like an idiot. Then instinct kicked in. Gen slanted a look sideways, pulling himself together with practiced ease, and let his voice drop into something smoother—something a little more like himself—as he leaned in just a fraction closer, brushing shoulders now as he whispered back:

"Terribly so."

It still came out rough around the edges, not quite as perfectly slick as he would have liked—but it was good enough.

Senku caught the faint hitch in Gen’s voice, the slight unevenness beneath the practiced tease—and felt something warm and electric flicker low in his chest.

Kohaku, across the room, silently pumped her fist in victorious encouragement even though she hadn't heard a word. Meanwhile, Ukyo, on the other hand, *had* heard—and promptly choked on his tea. Ryusui clapped him hard on the back, grinning like a man without a single ounce of shame, "Ha! Can’t have my crew dying on me!"

Francois, standing neatly to the side, merely tilted their lips in a faintly amused smile, watching the entire mess unfold with a detached sort of grace.

"So what then, a forest fire?" Taiju asked.

Senku raised a thumb to his chin as he thought it over, before admitting, "I don't believe it's a mere coincidence. The timing suggests that it's a response to the smoke we created."

Occam’s Razor—the simplest answer was usually correct—and considering everything they knew so far, the simplest answer here was clear.

"It's time to get excited, you two," Senku said, a sharp edge of anticipation threading through his voice, "Because it looks like we've found someone else in this Stone World."

"If I may, Senku-sama," They said, tilting their head slightly. "There are other logical possibilities as well. For instance—could this not also be evidence of a group who was never petrified? Survivors who continued living through the millennia?"

It wasn’t a challenge, just a calm, curious observation. Senku tapped a knuckle against the table lightly, acknowledging the question without irritation.

"A possibility," He agreed. "But unlikely."

He flicked a glance back at the screen, calculating. "If there were entire civilizations that survived the petrification event, we would've seen signs long before now. Old structures would have been upkept somehow. Modernized land. Smoke patterns, crop fields—anything that indicated continuous human activity. The fact that everything's been untouched, that we had to rebuild from zero, points to a full global reset."

He leaned forward, voice sharpening slightly, "And if someone had been surviving in secret for thousands of years? They wouldn't need to set a fire to signal us. They had far more likely things they would do. They'd either avoid us—or ambush us."

Francois nodded once, seemingly satisfied. "In other words, the most logical explanation is that this fire was set by someone who, like you, has only recently awakened."

Senku grinned, sharp and satisfied. "Exactly. Of course that did end up not being the case, but still it was the most likely answer. What actually happened is beyond calculating." After all, who could predict that old man of his doing something crazy.

In shocked disbelief, Taiju gasped, "Woah, there's more people? We're not alone?"

Senku continued staring off into the distance, mind racing. This complicated things. Was this a potential ally? How would it impact the current plan? Should they chance meeting them now, or wait until after the inevitable confrontation with Tsukasa? If Tsukasa reached them first, it would destroy what little advantage Senku had. Multiple people on Tsukasa's side would create a danger that wouldn't be easy to overcome—not even close.

"I'm almost offended, Senku," she said dryly.

Senku didn't even glance at her as he flicked a finger against his ear, casual as anything, "Don't be, lioness. I was just going through the most likely scenarios."

Kohaku's eye twitched dangerously.

"Don't call me that," She snapped.

Still not looking, Senku shrugged lazily, the motion loose and offhanded—and in the process, his shoulder bumped lightly against Gen’s, a casual jostle like he barely noticed it. Kohaku snapping at that would never get old, well, her reaction to gorilla was a little bit better admittedly

He felt his thoughts spiraling a billion miles a minute. He needed to slow down. He took a small, steady breath, pressing his fingers together—not bringing them to his forehead, not this time—but the familiarity of the motion grounded him. Memories flickered. Ada. Calming down. Getting the mental order back where it belonged.

Behind him, Yuzuriha’s worried voice broke the tension, "Don’t you think we should finish putting out the fire?"

Ryusui leaned back in his seat, slinging an arm over the back with an easy grin.

"Ha! Never underestimate how quickly our crafting goddess catches on to things!" He declared, voice rich with amusement.

Across the room, Kohaku’s eyes narrowed slightly at the phrasing—they had talked about this and frankly Ryusui was lucky those two had gotten together or she would have had to make good on her threat, but before she could say anything, Taiju jumped in, beaming with pride.

"I know, right?! She’s so smart!" he gushed, practically vibrating with enthusiasm.

Yuzuriha ducked her head, cheeks flushing pink at the praise.

Taiju immediately agreed, "Yeah, you’re right!"

What mattered most now was making sure Tsukasa didn’t get to them first. If he did, Senku’s plans would be in utter shambles. They couldn’t let that happen. So the best possible move was—

"As far as they know, our smoke could've been caused naturally by a small volcanic explosion," Senku said, tone sharpening with focus. "We need to send a signal back before they decide to give up and leave."

Gen tapped his chin thoughtfully, a spark of mischief glinting in his eye. He wanted to test some theories, and how better than—

"If you really think about it," He said, voice dropping to something lazy and conspiratorial, hoping that scientfic facts would spark something in Senku, "Volcanic eruptions can cause massive thunderstorms too. Static charges, explosive ash clouds—makes that little puff of smoke look downright adorable in comparison, don't you think?"

He shot Senku a sideways glance, testing, teasing.

Senku arched a brow slowly.

"Nice science trivia, Mentalist," He said, dry as desert sand. "But you’re not slick. I see what you're doing."

As he spoke, Senku shifted in his seat without much thought—leaning closer, so their legs pressed flush together. His shoulder bumped Gen’s again, and when it got awkwardly in the way, Senku casually threw his arm back behind the chair—technically behind Gen now—without a second of hesitation. The move was so classic—so unintentionally possessive—that Gen had to bite back a grin. Oh, he *saw* it. And even if Senku didn’t realize the kind of signals he was sending, Gen was absolutely going to savor the moment.

"Haha! Classic arm technique! As expected from Senku!" Ryusui whooped, snapping his fingers like he’d just witnessed a master at work.

Senku blinked at him, deadpan, and scratched idly at his ear with the opposite hand—the side that wasn't even behind Gen. No rock remnants in that ear, but the habit was ingrained, muscle memory was an amazing science, he would love to learn even more about it, but unfortunately those types of passion projects would have to wait.

"Don't know what the hell you're talking about," Senku said flatly, the picture of disinterest—never mind the way his entire posture was practically draped around Gen now.

"I think I get it now!" Taiju said brightly.

Do you, big oaf? Senku thought, feeling faint fondness even through the stress.

In the real world, Taiju wiped at his eyes a little too hard, looking ridiculously proud of himself. Yuzuriha beamed at him, and Kohaku gave him a solid pat on the back that almost knocked him forward.

"You'd think I gave him a compliment instead of literally doubting him," Senku whispered, turning his head toward Gen a little bit, they were already so close—Hmmm, this was warm. Senku rather liked it. Kind of practical in a weird way. Another reason people likely got into relationships in the first place. Senku FELT it when Gen have that huffy laugh he sometimes did with a sleeve covering his mouth. He could feel his own lips twitch up, THIS was much better than Gen hiding feeling uncomfortable.

Why had he spent so long being nervous about this? So far so good, scientifically speaking this relationship had done nothing but lower his stress levels via repeated contact that seemed to spark lots of positive brain chemicals.

"Are you sure?" Yuzuriha asked, glancing between the two. "Won't Tsukasa be able to see it too?"

It would be worth it. But her worries were very valid. He was worried about it too—but what else could they do?

"We'll be broadcasting our location to everyone, including him," Senku admitted, and he couldn't help the grin that pulled across his face, sharp and electric. His blood felt like it was sparking under his skin, alive in a way that only came with risk and impossible calculations. The least logical part of him—the part some people might call a gut instinct—was screaming. Lighting the fire was dangerous. He knew that. He knew it

with the same certainty he knew how to build a radio or a rocket engine. He had to choose between safety and their future. Between minimizing risk and maximizing their chances.

Ukyo gave a dry little hum, before saying under his breath, "What an untimely reminder that Senku's an adrenaline junkie."

Senku rolled his eyes with theatrical patience, "I thought we were over that discussion."

Across the way when Senku wasn't looking, Taiju shifted slightly where he sat, tension creeping up his back. He knew what was coming soon. All three of them did. Without a word, Yuzuriha slid her hand into his, squeezing gently. Taiju squeezed back, holding on a little tighter than he probably meant to. Both of them kept their eyes trained forward, trying to stay relaxed—trying to stay strong.

Suddenly, Yuzuriha frowned, "I better not find out that your adrenaline junkie behavior made you act more dangerous when it came to Tsukasa or... OR..." She trailed off.

Senku smirked, "Got it, don't worry, it didn't. Not in this case."

Yet...

"What do we do, Senku? Put it out? Or light it?" Taiju demanded, turning to him with that steadfast trust he always had.

Senku grinned wider. "Let's light it up! Fire the smoke signal!"

The best way to do it would be to make the signal rhythmic—something that made it clear it wasn't natural. If they used the gunpowder to make three consecutive bursts of sound, loud and distinct, it would leave no room for misunderstanding. After that, they could let it burn normally. It would also give him the perfect excuse to send Yuzuriha and Taiju away when the inevitable confrontation with Tsukasa came. Hopefully, if things worked out, they would find the newcomers first—before Tsukasa ever caught up.

Taiju immediately rocketed off, pumping his fists in excitement. Yuzuriha trailing after him. "All right! I'm gonna go get some firewood!"

"Haha! That kind of spirit's exactly what I need!" Ryusui declared, grinning wide. He thumped a fist against his chest, looking for all the world like he was about to offer Taiju a full-time contract on the spot, "Quick to act, strong, zero hesitation—I've got to have you in my company someday. I want you so bad!"

Taiju flushed slightly, scratching at his cheek in embarrassment, while Yuzuriha gave a soft, shaky laugh, squeezing his hand again. Somehow she pulled herself together enough to joke, "I'm not sure I want to share. I just got him to myself!"

Everyone in the room blinked at her.

There was a half-second beat of stunned silence—and then Senku lost it, laughing helplessly as he leaned into Gen without even thinking. It wasn't a sharp, sarcastic laugh either; it was real, sudden, bright. He never would have expected something like that out of Yuzuriha.

Ryusui looked utterly charmed.

"I like that sort of thinking too!" He crowed. "Protect what belongs to you!"

Gen almost started laughing too—*almost*—but Senku was leaning against him now, the soft brush of his hair against Gen's cheek distracting him completely. It was softer than he expected—fine, almost silky—and it smelled faintly like sun-warmed stone and something sharper underneath. *This isn't normal,* Gen thought, a little off balance. Senku didn't just lean on people. At least he wasn't pulling away—but just what was he trying to do here?

Gen shifted slightly, torn between indulging it and trying to get his head back in the game.

Because no matter how stupidly sweet the moment was, Tsukasa was coming.

Soon.

And Gen already knew, deep down, that whatever Senku was planning... he wasn't going to like it. He found himself tensing without meaning to, every muscle going tight with a quiet, gathering dread. As if feeling it—*maybe without even much thinking about it*—Senku's hand moved, slow and rough, rubbing lightly across Gen's shoulder in a quiet, unconscious attempt at reassurance.

Wasn't he being a little too soft for that?

> Taiju took off down the mountain at crazy speeds, searching for bigger pieces of wood. Yuzuriha stayed behind, gathering sticks, hoping it would be enough to hold the fire until Taiju got back with something sturdier... Well, knowing Taiju, it would probably be more than a *little* sturdier. She smiled faintly to herself—he was always over the top like that.
>
> It almost sounded like a gust of wind landing behind her. But out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of something sharp—too fast, too close—and her whole body went cold. A sharp gasp escaped her without thinking. She couldn't see him fully, but there was only one option. Tsukasa. Her heart hammered against her ribs, but oddly, her mind stayed clear. She was grateful, at least, that it was her and not Senku that Tsukasa had found first. At least this way... Senku would have a chance.
>
> "I don't want to have to hurt you," Tsukasa said, his voice low—almost gentle. It was strange. She really did get the feeling that he didn't want to hurt her. That he was giving her an out, if she was smart enough to take it. She swallowed hard, trying to push the lump in her throat down. They needed time. Senku would find a way—if she could just buy them a little more time.
>
> Yuzuriha nodded stiffly. She wanted to answer, but the words refused to come.

Taiju gripped Yuzuriha's hand a little tighter, his knuckles white around hers. Yuzuriha squeezed back, gentle but firm, both of them sitting stiff and wide-eyed, forcing themselves not to look away from the screen.

Beneath Senku's casually slung arm, Gen had gone tense as a drawn bowstring, every line of him tight and coiled. Senku felt it—the way Gen had locked up, the shift in the air—and for a moment, he hesitated. Then he pulled his arm back slightly, the motion quiet but deliberate. Still keeping his leg pressed lightly against Gen's under the table—still tethered—but giving Gen enough space to breathe.

Chrome frowned, "I really don't get that guy sometimes."

Understandable, and the reason why was pretty damn simple too, Senku thought to himself before replying, "That's because the way he acts is so hypocritical, probably some sort of trauma reaction, our Mentalist would know better."

Gen exhaled slowly, tapping a finger lightly against his leg as all eyes shifted toward him.

"It's not that complicated," He said, voice surprisingly even. "When someone experiences extreme trauma—especially the kind that shakes their core beliefs—they usually go one of two ways. Either they try to heal and rebuild... or they break, and they start trying to rebuild the *world* instead."

"Tsukasa's caught in a constant loop of cognitive dissonance," Gen continued. "He doesn't want to hurt people. Not really. But he's built a narrative where hurting people he labels as 'corrupt' is necessary to protect innocence. If he lets himself question that—even for a second—everything he's done becomes unforgivable."

He smiled thinly, without humor.

"So instead, he doubles down. Harder and harder. Because the alternative would break him worse than anything else ever could. After all, he has already destroyed many statues. If he admits he is wrong now, well, he really would be a murderer."

> Senku knew the timing was getting close. He could feel it in his bones, in the back of his skull where he always kept the count ticking, ringing through every nerve like a warning bell. If he were religious, he might've said his whole body was sensing the end coming.
>
> A single foot pressed hard into the ground behind him.
>
> Senku turned halfway, casting his gaze back—but he couldn't see him.
>
> Didn't matter. He needed to stall. He needed to buy Taiju and Yuzuriha enough time to get back, or everything would go to hell.

They were hearing Senku's thoughts, but what played out onscreen told a slightly different story. It was obvious now—painfully obvious—that Senku hadn't intended for Yuzuriha to be the one caught by Tsukasa. He hadn't even realized she wasn't with Taiju. Everyone in the room had made their peace with Tsukasa, more or less—but seeing him like this again, poised and predatory, still left a bitter taste.

Let's get this over with, Senku thought, feeling that uncomfortable prickle crawl up his spine—the deep, hollow discomfort of having his own thoughts and feelings laid bare for everyone to see.

He glanced toward Yuzuriha, who was shifting slightly in her seat, looking just as uneasy.

Heh. At least it was going to show her being a little bit of a badass, even if it was... misdirected.

Small mercies.

> "Aha... If weapons of science enter the scene," Senku called out lightly, voice controlled despite the tension coiling under his skin, "That's when the strongest man is no longer the most powerful."
>
> He turned a little more—
>
> Yuzuriha.
>
> His heart skipped a beat.
>
> She had left Taiju's side? Of all the times—!
>
> "I'd say you're looking especially grumpy, Tsukasa," Senku finished, forcing the words out, locking down the flood of panic rising in his chest.
>
> Stay calm. Plan. Adapt.

Gen was analyzing everything. It had been a point of frustration for him, if he was being honest. He'd wanted to know about these early moments for a while now—had *waited* for it

—but figuring out the right way to approach it with Senku had always been a puzzle he couldn't quite solve. This chance? This was everything he could have asked for—something perfectly in his wheelhouse.

He was trying his best—*really* trying—to use every ounce of professionalism he had to keep the worry off his face. It was irrational, he knew that. Senku was right next to him.

Their legs were literally touching.

He was fine.

But still—

It was always fascinating to him how good Senku was at self-regulating. At locking down every outward sign of panic when the situation demanded it. And now, watching it play out onscreen—seeing that *split-second* where Senku's heart must have skipped a beat, watching how he locked his panic out again. Not healthy, but impressive. The same as when Ada had fallen ill, or when he realized for the first time Tsukasa was a danger, all of these different situations and times where he had used the skill now stuck out like a sore thumb.

> Tsukasa wouldn't want to kill her—not if he could use her instead. That was still workable. That was still to plan. Senku felt a bead of sweat trail down his temple. His hands itched with the urge to move—*do something*—but no. Not yet. Play along. Don't let Tsukasa suspect a thing.
>
> They were going to be okay.
>
> Seeing his old friend with a blade pressed to Yuzuriha's throat almost made his vision flash white—but they were going to be okay.
>
> "Yeah, I suppose that's accurate," Tsukasa said, calm as ever. "If you develop weapons, revive the older generations, it'll just bring back the same corruption. I don't mind getting my hands dirty to stop that."
>
> Senku gritted his teeth behind a neutral smile. *Hypocrite.* It was like arguing with a fanatic. Facts didn't matter. Only conviction.

Everyone was tense. No one quite seemed to know what to say— even Ryusui, for once, sat back in his chair, arms folded tightly across his chest. The weight of the moment pressed down on all of them. Gen shifted slightly, forcing the tension out of his shoulders, trying to inject a little levity before the whole room cracked apart.

"Well," he said lightly, tapping two fingers against his leg, "I have to say—impressively good acting work there, Senku. Mentalist approved."

Senku snorted quietly under his breath without looking away from the screen, the faintest crack in the tension.

"And by that, you mean you have to kill me, right?" Senku asked dryly, cracking a laugh. "I'm sure the world would weep at your merciful death sentence."

"But first," Tsukasa said, "the recipe for the Revival Fluid."

Senku didn't hesitate internally. Ten billion percent, he was going to give it. If his plan failed—if everything else crumbled—at least Tsukasa would still have a way to preserve humanity. *Backup plans within backup plans.*

But he couldn't make it *look* like that was his choice.

"I can see why you would make this choice, Master Senku," They said, "But I must point out —" They inclined their head ever so slightly, the faintest edge of something sharper threading through their voice, "—it is far better for humanity if you were to survive."

Senku blinked, caught off guard by the clinical certainty of it.

Francois continued smoothly, unbothered: "Perhaps you should take a lesson in life from Master Ryusui."

Senku stared, "Huh?! From *Ryusui*?"

Ryusui pressed a hand dramatically to his chest, feigning deep offense.

"How cruel!" he declared, though he was grinning wide enough that it completely ruined the act.

Francois' lips tilted the barest fraction higher, "Yes," They said simply. "Find your own personal greed, Master Senku. Some greed for your own life."

Senku cracked his neck lazily, keeping his act casual. "Nope. Sorry. I guess I'm not as kind as you are," he said. "I only look at things logically or illogically. So I don't care one millimeter what you do to that girl. There are plenty of other females you could revive—"

Tsukasa moved faster than Senku's eyes could track.

Senku instinctively lurched forward, breath locking in his chest, panic flooding through him before he could shove it down.

Too fast— *Did he actually—?!*

Yuzuriha—

It was only her hair.

In the real world, Taiju let out a shaky breath—and then abruptly, he was crying. Tears welled up, overflowing in an instant, as he gripped Yuzuriha's hand like a lifeline. Yuzuriha smiled gently, soft and sure despite everything. Without hesitation, she pulled Taiju toward her, guiding his head against her chest, threading her fingers gently through his hair in a soothing, steady rhythm. Taiju clung to her like a drowning man, arms wrapping around her waist, silent sobs wracking his shoulders as he tried—and failed—not to break completely.

No one said anything.

Senku watched it all quietly, filing it away somewhere deep inside. It was interesting, in a clinical sense. The emotional feedback loop between them. The way Yuzuriha anchored Taiju without a word. The way Taiju, for all his strength, had always worn his heart on his sleeve—and somehow, that vulnerability made them both stronger. Beyond the clinical, he tries his best to ignore the twisting of guilt that came up, he wasn't exactly the biggest fan that his plan

had ended with her being in danger, that was his own fault for not keeping track of the variables better. Science was all trial and error though, so he would do better next time, if he never needed to.

Senku's heart slammed against his ribs hard enough to hurt. He fought to steady his breathing, rage and terror crashing through him like twin storms.

Tsukasa had made his point.

"Don't try to negotiate, Senku," Tsukasa said, sighing like it was *him* who was disappointed. "You never buried Yuzuriha. You left her out in the open. You must've known I could use her against you."

Senku had known. Of course he had. But burying his friends like corpses? Even for strategy's sake?

Impossible.

Taiju squeezed Yuzuriha a little tighter, his breath hitching visibly. Yuzuriha, her fingers still combing gently through his hair, didn't look away from the screen, but her voice was steady when she spoke. "Senku could never have done that. Not to anyone he cared about."

Taiju nodded fiercely, voice thick but determined. "Yeah. That's just who he is... He always finds a way without giving up on people."

Gen still seemed upset, Senku noted, and he wanted to do something about that, but wasn't really sure what. Urgh, why was trying to make a relationship happen so much work. It had already been like, at least an hour. Maters of emotiosn were meant to be quicker than science.

"You call yourself logical, but you cling to your precious friends," Tsukasa continued. "That's why I win, Senku."

Senku ground his teeth, refusing to answer. But then—Yuzuriha giggled.

A soft, bright sound that broke the tension like a flash of sunlight.

"I actually appreciate the haircut," she said cheerfully, holding the spear steady at her own neck. "It'll be easier to take care of like this in the Stone World."

Senku nearly closed his eyes, heart clenching. *You idiot.* You brilliant, amazing idiot.

"Please, don’t tell him, Senku," Yuzuriha said, voice steady. "If he doesn’t know, he’ll have to keep you alive. I’m not important. You are."

"Haha! So impressive!" Ryusui immediately claimed, laughing brightly, as if Yuzuriha had just pulled off a perfect business negotiation instead of quietly offering her life to protect Senku.

Taiju’s eyes were wet again, dredging up pride and awe in equal measure, and even though he was still clinging to Yuzuriha’s hand, there was a new steadiness in the way he looked at her. Yuzuriha herself rubbed the back of her head, bashful under the sudden praise, but even her usual modesty couldn’t hide the quiet strength shining through. Gen had to admit, those two being together was quickly becoming dangerously adorable. It was almost unfair. While Senku had always been the standout mentally—brilliant, reckless, unshakable in his own way—Taiju had proven himself insane in a different arena: the sheer force of his stamina, both physical and emotional. And Yuzuriha? She was just as crazy as the other two, maybe even braver in the ways that mattered most. Those three deserved one another, in their own insane little constellation.

"Surely after all your years together, you must have known that Master Senku wouldn't allow such a thing to happen," Francois asked, sounding a little surprised, a little impressed—though of course the professionalism in their tone remained perfectly in place.

"Yeah..." Yuzuriha said, still pink-cheeked, "But I was worried about him."

Senku rolled his eyes, "I think you should have been more worried about the knife at your neck."

There was technically one at yours, Gen thought ot himself, a little less than impressed.

That wasn’t exactly the plan, but that didn't meant that Senku didn't appreciate her effort. Senku pressed his fingers together at his sides—seeking calm, seeking focus—and took a slow, steady breath.

They would forgive him.

They would figure it out.

He had to believe that the bricks he'd laid down would be enough.

Playback resumes in 15 minutes

Francois agreed with a quiet precision that somehow made it all the more genuine. "A leader who places faith in others rather than seeking control," They said, "It's a rare quality."

Gen tilted his head slightly, his smile fixed but brittle at the edges.

Ehhhh, he thought dryly, *I think it's a little beyond that, actually... and I don't like it one damn bit.*

This wasn't just faith. This wasn't just delegation. This was Senku laying down every brick of a plan with the expectation—the near certainty—that he was going to die. That wasn't leadership. That was a sacrifice. A silent, stupid, reckless gamble he hadn't bothered to mention to any of them. It was a good thing, Gen thought sourly, that Senku had agreed to leaving the actual planning to him. Because if this was the kind of crap Senku had been cooking up before, then clearly someone had to keep an eye on the mad scientist before he self-destructed for the "greater good" without warning.

Still, now wasn't the time to get angry.

Senku was opening up—Senku had let him stay close—so instead of snapping at him, Gen shifted deliberately, pushing his leg and side closer until they were flush, his shoulder tucked lightly against Senku's. If Senku was going to allow it, then until Gen could figure out what Senku was trying to accomplish, then Gen would take advantage of it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if it's not up to usual standards! Some sections probably have some rough draft vibes. I'll double check it tomorrow with a clear head and make sure I'm not missing

anything horrible. I'll also respond to everyone's comments tomorrow as well! For now I'm gonna lay down and drink some water.

I appreciate all of you!!

Also evernote is annoying keeps messing up my formatting but at the same time I like using it so fuck it.

Oh ALSO WE HAVE A WONDERFUL BETA READER NOOOOWWWW They are going through the earlier chapters but they are amazing and I am quite thankful they offered.

Join the discord if you want we are pretty good at having fun over there. Very chill. Very DrStone. Nice vibes,

Chapter 18: Episode 4 Part 3

Chapter by orphan_account

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was basically fifteen minutes of silence. Mildly pleasant, all things considered, despite the tension still hanging in the air—if only because Gen was so close by. And wasn't that still somewhat weird to admit. If he'd been affected by Gen before, the lack of denial now made everything about his proximity... more tolerable. Pleasant, even. Senku tapped his fingers against his knee, casual but precise. Thirty-two seconds left.

Let's get this over with.

...He wanted to spend some time in the lab with the Mentalist. It had been hours. This had to be the final stretch, right? And if it wasn't—well, he could *make* it the final stretch. It was time travel, after all. Would that mess with causality? Possibly. But he could always account for it. A little greedy, sure, but it would make the math more interesting, and that was never something he turned down. He wasn't just reasoning with himself to take time selfishly. That would be illogical.

Okay.

Maybe attraction didn't bring out the best in him.

The playback resumed. Everyone, who until now had been locked in terse conversation or silent brooding, immediately turned toward the screen with renewed focus—like they'd all been holding their breath.

"The revival fluid is a combination of nitric acid and alcohol," Senku said evenly, watching Tsukasa's face for any flicker of comprehension. "First, you filter the miracle water from the cave—get it clean. Then mix it with alcohol, distilled as close to ninety-six percent as possible."

He could hear Yuzuriha crying.

He didn’t dare look.

"URGH! I can’t stand it! I don’t understand why you just told him!" Chrome burst out, looking genuinely close to ripping his hair out.

Senku gave him an unimpressed glance. If he recalled correctly—and he always did—his thoughts had spelled that out less than two hours ago. What was the hang-up? He rolled his eyes and explained again, voice dry: “Like you heard earlier, if something *were* to go wrong—which it won’t—at least someone would still be able to revive humanity.”

"They won’t like science, though!" Chrome protested, clearly distressed.

Heh. Chrome really was *so* attached to science. A flicker of pride stirred in Senku’s chest—warm and mildly nauseating. “The truth that Tsukasa doesn’t want to admit,” Senku said, “Is that humans will *always* bring science back. He was never going to get the world he wanted. People have the drive to understand their surroundings. Even if he managed to destroy everything, science would rise again. You’re the perfect example, Chrome. You didn’t know exactly what you were collecting or studying, but you did it anyway. There will always be people like that. Even bringing back just *one* more human would be better than none, if I wasn’t around to rebuild.”

Chrome looked just flattered enough to start settling down, pride creeping into his expression as he adjusted his posture with a huff.

“Whilest that is correct, Master Senku,” Francois cut in smoothly, “I would still encourage you to recall my earlier advice.”

Before Senku could express his displeasure at learning from Ryusui again, there was a poke to Senku’s cheek.

Senku flinched at the unexpected touch and whipped his head around, eyes landing on Gen—grinning wide, unbothered, and far too close. His grin was soft around the edges, playful but

sharp, and something about it made Senku's throat tighten unexpectedly.

Was that... just a normal grin?

Why did Gen *look* like that?

"What?" Senku asked, a little too flat, too off-guard.

Gen's grin shifted into something smugger, quieter, his voice dropping low, "Make sure to listen to their advice, Senku-chan. I don't want to lose you before I get to have you."

Have me.

Have me?

HAVE ME?

Senku swallowed again. He prayed to whatever gods existed that his expression didn't reflect the absolute internal screaming currently spiraling through his brain. He rolled his eyes and turned quickly back to the screen, desperately ignoring Ukyo's raised brow from across the room.

Was this how blatant they were playing this now? Was he going to have to match this kind of flirting? Would that make their little game more effective, or just break it completely? Did the Mentalist even realize Senku had started this game yet, or was this just his natural flirting?

Was that an opening move?

Was now seriously the time to do this? He was about to *die* on screen. Not exactly the most conducive backdrop for seduction.

Then again... dissecting his own mortality wasn't a much better alternative.

Maybe he *should* just take it and run.

> Senku locked that sound in the back of his mind, sealing it tight behind mental partitions. He had to. It hurt too much otherwise. It was fine. It was temporary. They *would* bring him back. She wouldn't have to mourn for long.
>
> In other words, He thought to himself, lips curling dryly, *Even with* your ideal civilization, you'll still need science to build it.

The thought—the way the words landed—swirled around in Gen's mind like smoke.

They would bring him back, huh?

Senku-chan really was insane. Utterly batshit. And it pissed him off something royal. Ukyo and Ryusui definitely hadn't missed the implication. Chrome probably wouldn't have either, if not for the fact that he was still basking in the pride Senku had handed him earlier like a gold medal. He'd come around to the horror later.

Kohaku clearly knew. If she didn't, there would've been *that* Kohaku look on her face.

Taiju and Yuzuriha looked like they were about to cry.

Gen gave a long, hard blink.

Well. If Senku was going to allow that much contact—if he was going to lean into him like that, press their legs together, make no move to pull away—then Gen was going to take advantage of it. Angry as he was, he still wanted reassurance. Needed it, maybe. Without farther hesitation, Gen reached over and grabbed Senku's wrist. The flinch was instant, instinctual—but Gen held firm. And almost immediately, Senku relaxed into the touch.

Interesting implications for Senku's potential touch deprivation, but that was a science experiment for another day.

Gen drew in a slow breath, then carefully interlaced their fingers, letting their joined hands drop naturally into the crease between their legs. Hidden. Intimate. Steady.

"What a charming little self-sacrifice fantasy," Gen muttered, voice low and edged. A whisper, but harsh.

Senku turned sharply, eyes a little too wide, a faint blush blooming across his cheeks.

Seriously?! Now?

Gen sighed through his nose. Just like that, any anger he'd been clinging to started slipping through his fingers. Clearly, speaking had been a mistake. Touching him even more so. If Senku could manipulate him *without even trying,* what chance did he have when the man actually *meant* it?

Senku blinked once, the blush deepening slightly, then turned back to the screen with a half-snort. "I'll take that as a compliment," he muttered, eyes back on the screen. "Heard the word *charming*—I'll pretend that was the main idea."

> "The ratio's thirty percent miracle fluid to seventy percent alcohol. If you're off by a few points, the reaction won't trigger. You'll just have a corpse and a wasted formula."
>
> His voice didn't waver.
>
> "You should fine-tune it by testing on a petrified swallow feather," he added aloud, eyes steady. Just in case. Just in case. Just... in case.
>
> Tsukasa's expression hadn't changed. That soft smile was still there, gentle and calm. Unbothered. It twisted something deep and furious in Senku's gut—rage that felt almost mechanical in its clarity.

"Haha! Guess Tsukasa really lit a fire under Senku's ass," Ryusui commented, his humor tinged just a little too dark considering the context. "I like to see that kind of passion!"

Senku's hand tightened around Gen's for a moment before he realized it—reflexive, sharp. But the strange part was the warmth that followed, blooming quietly through his chest. Huh. He could definitely understand why Taiju and Yuzuriha hadn't let go of each other once. If this constant low hum of comfort was what they were getting from it… it actually made sense.

Still, it was unpleasant—having everyone see this side of him. Not just the vulnerability or the grief. They'd seen those before. But this… this uglier part of his mind. The part that got angry. That grew sharp and bitter and calculated. He didn't usually let that slip through. And even now, on screen, they weren't *seeing* the anger—just hearing the words, hearing the logic that came wrapped in something colder. Something tighter.

It was rare. He didn't like that they could hear it.

"You're really not great at hiding your anger, Senku-chan. It always starts with your right ear—every time. Little flush, right there," As he said it, the Mentalist reached up with his free hand and tapped the tip of Senku's ear. Senku blinked—once, twice—taken off guard by the touch more than the words.

Distracting? Maybe. Effective? Absolutely.

He wasn't on the edge of breaking down or anything. This wasn't like watching Africa—this didn't even come close. If they got mad at him, fine. If they judged him, whatever. Compared to the crying? The helplessness? He'd take this ten billion times over.

> *Utterly irrational logic,* Senku thought. *Kill the only scientist who can do what you need like medical supplies, then smile about it like it's mercy.*
>
> "Thank you so much, Senku," Tsukasa said. "And now, I no longer have any reason to let you live."
>
> Senku stared back, numb beneath the anger, his mind already skipping ahead to the calculations of failure and backup plans. Go figure. At least Tsukasa was predictable.

"I still don’t understand how he could try this..." Taiju admitted, his voice soft and sad.

Well, it didn’t exactly matter anymore. No point in letting everyone dwell on it too long, “Remember, he changed. He admitted what he did was wrong.” And Senku had gotten to perform surgery on him without any anesthetic, so honestly, he’d say they were even, “No use thinking about it too much.”

"But..." Taiju said, almost hesitantly—unusual for him. "Just because we’ve moved past it doesn’t mean we have to forget it, right?"

Always a little too practical when it suited the big oaf to throw a wrench in his plans.

Senku didn’t answer right away. Trying to explain Tsukasa’s logic—or rather, *Tsukasa’s trauma response*, as Gen would call it—only reminded Senku of his own boundaries. Or lack thereof. Because the truth was, if it had come down to it... if blood had been necessary... they’d planned for that too. Just because it *hadn’t* been needed didn’t mean the contingencies hadn’t been in place. He and Gen had designed a bloodless war, but with backup plans—carefully structured failsafe's that accounted for violence. If things had gone wrong, they’d already mapped out the least costly version of that outcome.

He didn’t want to explain that to Taiju.

His friend wouldn’t approve. Not that it would end their friendship—it was stronger than that—but still.

> Taiju was searching for the perfect log—something nice and big that would keep the fire going as long as possible. He wandered through the trees, eyes scanning the ground for anything that looked promising. Senku had told him firewood worked best if it was dry, so he was trying his best to follow that advice... even if it meant his options were pretty slim.
>
> *Maybe I should just take a bunch of smaller ones instead,* Taiju thought, already nodding to himself. That was totally doable! If he made a few trips, it’d be just as good.

"So *this* is what the big oaf was doing while we were fighting for our lives," Senku muttered, pinky stuck casually in his ear as he passively bullied his best friend—and brother in all but name.

Not that he was *trying* to distract the big oaf and their mutual friend—his *girlfriend* now, apparently. Huh. Even though it had been a long time coming, the word still sat weird in his head.

"Seeeennnnnnkuuuuuuuuuuu!" Taiju whined, full of righteous indignation.

"Ehhh? Got something you wanna say?" Senku shot back immediately, unimpressed.

"You're *lucky* I'm happy for you right now!" was all Taiju managed to say.

Weird.

Senku blinked and frowned slightly. He wondered what exactly Taiju was referring to.

Next to him, Gen didn't say a word. He just started lightly tracing his thumb along the side of Senku's fingers—slow, lazy little movements like he had all the time in the world and every intention of making Senku squirm.

Senku scowled.

Mentalist bastard.

He crouched and gathered as many medium-sized branches as he could carry, arms full, feeling good about the plan. But just as he turned on his heel to head back—

He froze.

His eyes widened. His mouth dropped open.

"NOW THERE'S THREE SMOKE SIGNALS!" he shouted, voice echoing across the hillside.

Senku had been right again! Of course he had! The best way to do it *really was* to make multiple loud bursts—they'd made it unmistakable. Now there was no question about it.

"We're not the only ones here!" Taiju cheered, barely able to contain his excitement. It was amazing news—amazing science—and the first real sign that maybe, just maybe, things were starting to look up.

Grinning wide, he turned back toward Senku and Yuzuriha, he couldn't wait to tell them the news.

“Taiju really is fearless,” Gen commented, dragging a hand down his face with a sigh he didn’t quite mean. “You didn’t think that maybe it could’ve been an *enemy*?”

Taiju just beamed. “It *wasn’t*, though!”

Senku couldn’t help it—he shot the other a glance, warm and faintly exasperated. Yeah. That was Taiju for you.

“You always believe in the best possible outcome,” She murmured, smiling up at him. Yuzuriha leaned in just a little, her voice soft enough that it wasn’t really meant for the rest of them. “It’s one of the things I love most about you.”

Taiju turned bright red, eyes going wide—but his grin somehow got even bigger, like his whole body couldn’t hold all the joy at once.

Senku made a face and looked away, muttering something under his breath about cavity-inducing affection, but even he didn’t sound all that annoyed, and if anything he sounded curious.

> The whole situation was a little strange, Kohaku thought as she crouched down, preparing to spark the third fire. Normally, if someone was being cryptic like this—using signals and tricks instead of just showing themselves—it would be Chrome’s doing. But it wasn’t. He was back at the village, and this wasn’t his style anyway.
>
> So... who had set the fire?
>
> Her fingers worked quickly, striking friction with practiced ease. Sparks caught, the tinder flared, and a moment later smoke began to rise.
>
> “…Three…” she murmured under her breath, watching it curl into the sky.

"Oh wow! I guess the lioness really *can* count!" Chrome cut in, sounding genuinely amazed.

Kohaku smiled sweetly—then reached over and smacked him upside the head.

Gen leaned in just enough to make it deliberate. Probably an attempt to distract them from the more serious emotions, "Honestly, it's impressive that villagers can count at all. You're very advanced for your age."

Senku snorted and turned away, already disengaging from what was sure to be another ridiculous confrontation. If Gen had decided to start messing with their dear warrior, he was *ten billion percent* not getting involved. The Mentalist knew damn well what he was doing.

"You know, Gen, I could count just fine when I was *knocking out wild boars* at age six. Would you like a demonstration?"

"Nono! That won't be necessary, right, Senku dear?" Gen added.

Senku felt his eye twitch, the Mentalist was lucky he was so likable, "Not my table."

"Support me, Senku-chan~!"

Senku ignored him.

Gen started playing with his fingers again, and Senku could feel his ears heating up, surely enough, starting at the right ear.

> Tsukasa tossed Yuzuriha aside.
>
> Senku's muscles locked, every instinct screaming at him to run to her, to check that she was okay. But he didn't move. He couldn't—not with Tsukasa dropping down in front of him, spear in hand, eyes set on him like this was already done. It was time. He had planned for this. Strategized. Built every step to lead here. And yet, standing in the center of it, staring down death face-to-face, something in his chest still twisted sharply. So this was what it felt like.

Yuzuriha's eyes were glued to the screen, but she still managed a small, shaky breath, "I was fine, you know," she murmured, quiet but steady, like she was saying it to reassure him *now*, not the past version on the playback.

Senku didn't look at her, but his response came quick and a little too sharp. "Of course you were, you're made of stronger stuff than that."

Yuzuriha smiled anyway, that kind of knowing, infuriating smile only little sisters could pull off. "Such a high opinion of me."

Senku finally glanced her way, lips twitching just a little. He huffed out a breath. "You bounced like a rubber ball anyway. I wasn't that worried."

They shared a fond look.

> "Let's say I did let you live, right?" Tsukasa offered, voice so calm it nearly passed for kind. "You'd just develop civilization all over again. Can you promise me you won't do that? Because if you can, I'll let you live."
>
> A beautiful idea. Naïve. Senku understood the logic behind it, in that twisted way Tsukasa framed his morals. But even if Senku said yes, it wouldn't hold. Eventually, suspicion would fester. That animal instinct would surface. *Don't let a threat live.* Tsukasa wouldn't be able to ignore it. A threat left alive was a mistake waiting to happen.

Ukyo tilted his head, arms crossed loosely as he stared at the screen. "Would he have kept his word?"

The question hung for a second—quiet, thoughtful, and pointed. And Gen, of course, couldn't resist the invitation to dissect.

"Mmm… tricky," Gen murmured, tapping a finger against his chin. "In that exact moment? Maybe. I think part of him *wanted* to believe it. That if Senku gave him a clean, peaceful

promise, he could hold on to it. Wrap himself in it like a blanket. Use it to feel like the good guy.”

His voice didn’t rise. If anything, it softened.

“But the brain doesn’t work that way. Not when you’ve already crossed a line like this. Tsukasa's entire worldview is built around threat response. He sees civilization as a disease, and Senku as the carrier. Even if Senku had promised, that belief would’ve eroded it. Bit by bit. Until some future ‘what if’ pushed him over again.”

Gen’s fingers were still curled loosely with Senku’s beneath the chair, and he gave them a quiet squeeze.

“Eventually? He’d see Senku as a threat again. And he’d act on it. So… no. He wouldn’t have kept his word. Not because he’s evil. But because he’s afraid.”

> Senku let out a dry, amused breath. “What the hell are you talking about? I could promise anything to stay alive.”
>
> "You’d never lie," Tsukasa said, certain. "Not when it comes to science."
>
> That part, Senku had to concede, was fair. He could lie about anything else—but not that. Not the one thing that defined his entire existence.

It was interesting to Gen—how Senku refused to lie when it came to science. Most people would say anything to survive. That was the typical psychological response: self-preservation at all costs. But Senku? He subscribed to a different kind of logic. One where truth, at least in this domain, was non-negotiable. Gen couldn’t help but want to study it more—whether it was principle, pride, or something stranger entirely. And really, analyzing Senku’s moral quirks was a far better distraction than thinking too hard about whatever death-defying (or otherwise) plan he’d locked into motion this time.

> "So will you promise me, here and now—and for all time—that you’ll abandon science?" Tsukasa pressed. "Because if you can make that pledge, I won’t have to kill

you."

There was desperation in the offer, buried under composure. It was almost pathetic. And whatever slim measure of sympathy Senku might've had for Tsukasa's moral struggle evaporated the moment he threw Yuzuriha to the ground. He closed his eyes for half a second, took a breath deep into his lungs, and settled. Control the nerves. Focus the mind. Remember: with the steady application of science, anything is possible. That hypothesis had been tested, and tested again. He wasn't about to shift his faith now—not in some shaky notion of mercy from a man who had already made up his mind.

Taiju looked like he was holding his breath, one hand gripping Yuzuriha's so tightly it was a wonder she didn't flinch. She didn't speak—just squeezed back, steady and silent. Kohaku's expression had gone razor-sharp, rage tucked neatly behind her clenched jaw.

Senku exhaled slowly. He needed to mitigate the emotional fallout at least *a little*—because it *was* coming, no matter how logically they all tried to process what was next.

"You guys *do* remember I'm going to be fine, right?" He said dryly. "Let's not forget that, even if things start looking..."

"I wish I could bottle and sell that kind of delusional mindset," Ryusui drawled with a sharp laugh. "It'd make me rich even in this Stone World."

"It's not delusional," Senku shot back. "I'm perfectly fine *now*."

"Ha! Please," Ryusui said, waving a hand. "We're all way too smart to think *you* believe saying this is going to do much."

"Senku," Tsukasa said again, quiet now, almost mournful. "You know I'd rather not kill you. So I'll ask one more time. Will you promise to abandon science?"

Senku opened his eyes and met the gaze of the man who planned to kill him. "No," he said simply. "I can't do that."

"Of course not. I knew that would be your answer."

A snicker slipped out before he could stop it—he hoped it didn't sound as nervous as it felt. He was aiming for defiant here, not terrified. "Don't give me that crap. No matter

what I said, we both know you were going to kill me eventually. You'd find a reason."

"Maybe," Tsukasa admitted with a small, regretful shrug.

Enough stalling. Senku reached up and cracked his neck with exaggerated ease. Honestly, the relief of pressure felt kind of nice. For a moment, he caught himself wondering if that was what it would feel like when Tsukasa actually—

Not the time. Focus.

"Just kill me in one blow," he said, the words leaving his mouth smooth and sharp. "Because leaving me to suffer would be illogical and inefficient."

Gen exhaled slowly, dragging a hand down his face.

It was almost beautiful, in a twisted, deeply infuriating way. The calm delivery, the calculated defiance, the exact way Senku cracked his neck—drawing just enough attention to the movement without *over*playing it. All of it was precise. Measured. Layered with psychological cues so subtle most people wouldn't even notice.

He could hardly have done it better himself.

And he hated that.

Senku had learned this type of thing from HIS book. Did that mean that he played at least a small part in it? He didn't want to consider that, but it sat a little heavy in his chest.

Senku was playing with his fingers now.

There was a little flush sitting on his ears.

Unfairly adorable.

Senku shouldn't be able to distract him this easily.

> Tsukasa stepped forward, steady as ever. “Don’t worry, Senku. I’m going to sever your cervical nerve in a single strike.”

“Wait—what’s a *cervical nerve*?” Chrome asked, brows furrowed. “Is that… like… neck stuff?”

Francois inclined their head calmly. “Correct. The cervical nerves are a bundle of spinal nerves in the neck. Severing them causes immediate paralysis… and, depending on the point of separation, usually death.”

Chrome paled slightly, but Gen cut in before the silence could settle too hard.

“Specifically,” He added, voice unusually flat, “There are eight cervical nerves, C1 through C8. Damage high enough—like around C1 to C3—means instant shutdown of respiratory muscles. No breathing. No recovery. Just… blackout. Total system failure.”

He didn’t look away from the screen.

“You’d never even feel it. Just lights out.”

There was a long pause. Even Chrome didn’t have anything to say to that.

In a way, it would be a mercy, but it didn't really feel like that. Gen supposed it wouldn't, if the person in question was someone that you cared about. Or maybe that was when he should have found it even more merciful, Gen wasn't sure, it was kind of twisting in his head a little bit right now.

> There was a pause—brief, weighted—before Tsukasa spoke again, "You’ll be instantly knocked unconscious. Then you’ll die without suffering. I won’t miss."

Senku didn’t respond.

"Senku," Tsukasa continued, almost softly now, "I have a feeling that if we had met 3,700 years ago—before all of this, before the world turned to stone—you might’ve been my first real friend."

Senku let out a breath through his nose. Couldn’t quite stop the faint smile tugging at his mouth. *Fuck.*

"Maybe."

“Pity?” Ukyo asked quietly. “Or did you actually think…?”

Senku’s lips twisted, somewhere between a grimace and a wry smile. “We could’ve been. I can see that. But our paths diverged a long time ago. It’d be hard to be friends with someone like him after the career he chose.”

Really, there was no way to know with any certainty. Senku didn’t usually think of himself as the type to bond with someone who solved problems through violence—but the thought stalled halfway through. Okay. Maybe he *was* that type. It wasn’t exactly out of character, considering he’d once been willing to electrocute his own bullies in middle school.

He didn’t mean it as comfort, or agreement, or forgiveness. It was just... honest. That hypothetical world? The one Tsukasa kept talking about? Maybe in that one, without ideology or threats or blood in their hands, it really could’ve happened.

From the distance, he could just barely hear Taiju shouting—desperate, close. *Right on time.*

Everything falling into place. The prep work was done. The plan had been set. And now? Now it was out of his hands. Science, fate, probability, God—pick your variable. Senku exhaled once more and closed his eyes, letting the wind carry through his hair.

And then—

Black. Void.

Playback resumes in 12 Hours

Ukyo's brows were furrowed deep, arms crossed tightly across his chest. He could hear everyone's heartbeats, each one thudding differently in his ears—Kohaku's like a war drum, rapid and edged, the kind of rhythm that usually came right before violence. Senku's was far too calm for the situation, unnervingly steady. Ryusui's? Erratic. Like his emotions hadn't quite picked a direction to land yet.

And Tsukasa… seeing him like that brought back too many memories. Ukyo swallowed hard.

That had been an execution. Clean. Calculated. Unapologetic. There was no getting around that. It made something twist in his stomach to realize, again, that he had once worked under Tsukasa. That he'd trusted him. Followed him. Believed, if only for a while, that maybe it was the right path.

Was forgiveness really enough? Even if it came from Senku?

It was clear Senku *had* forgiven him. Yuzuriha and Taiju too. And honestly, they would've been well within their rights *not* to. Gen, though—Gen wasn't there. Not even close. His heartbeat was remarkably controlled, textbook even. Ukyo wouldn't be surprised if he could pass a polygraph out of spite. But his hand was bone-white where it gripped Senku's, and Ukyo caught the faint grinding sound of joint pressure. The slight twitch of pain that passed over Senku's face, even though he didn't pull away.

They had twelve hours.

Time to breathe. To decompress. To try to find words again.

And then, silently, Senku stood.

Gen blinked up at him, clearly surprised, as Senku slipped out of his grip—only to immediately grab Gen's *other* hand and start dragging him out of the room. The silence

lingered, unbroken, right up until the door slid shut behind them.

"…I desire that," Ryusui declared.

Then Ukyo huffed out a quiet, humorless laugh and sank back into his chair.

It wasn't even funny.

Chapter End Notes

Episode 4 part 3 is actually super short, so the next chapter will be out on Tuesday which is episode 5 part 1~ After that I will publish again on Saturday! See you guys then! Appreciate you!

We are super active in the discord if you wanna join in for updates and such. (Plus art! Having a lot of fun learning art!)

Hopefully these chapters aren't gonna disappoint! I know that everyone has been waiting!

Chapter 19: Episode 5 Part 1

Chapter by orphan_account

Chapter Notes

> I'm sorry in advance for the torture. I was going to go a little farther into this episode but I want to sleep. Don't worry!!! I'll be back on Saturday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They had twelve hours. Time to breathe. To decompress. To try to find words again.

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"...I desire that," Ryusui declared.

Then Ukyo huffed out a quiet, humorless laugh and sank back into his chair.

It wasn't even funny.

Gen followed silently, letting Senku lead him through the ship and into the lab. That alone was... a clue. A *big* one. Gen, quiet? Not teasing, not needling, not even throwing out a casual innuendo to lighten the tension? Yeah. He was upset.

Senku had predicted emotions would run high after the playback, of course. He'd even factored in some kind of emotional fallout. But *dealing with it*—specifically, *with Gen*—was something else entirely. What were the options here? Talking? Awkward. Apologizing? For what? No. He hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe... a hug? People liked hugs. There was data. Hugs released oxytocin, lowered cortisol, regulated breathing. All sorts of benefits.

Yeah. He'd try a hug.

And hopefully that would take the edge off whatever Gen was bottling up so they could move on—to something far more interesting. Like science. Or dissecting Ryusui's last dramatic one-liner. Or maybe asking Gen about some old mentalist case and watching how fast his eyes lit up.

Plan in place, Senku let the lab door swing shut behind them and turned to face Gen—who was already looking at him. Dead on. His face unreadable. Flat. Not sad, not angry, not sarcastic. Just... blank. A full mask. Senku hesitated. Okay. Weird. That was new. He'd seen Gen play a hundred roles, but this wasn't performance. This was *walling off*—deliberate, quiet, and not even theatrical about it.

Still, hugs were good for this kind of thing. Right?

He stepped forward, hesitated just a beat too long, and then wrapped his arms around Gen's waist.

…Yeah. No. That felt wrong.

Too stiff. Too awkward. It pinned Gen's arms, and the unimpressed eyebrow Senku got in return made it very clear: this was not working.

He huffed under his breath. Gen really wasn't going to help him with this, was he?

Fine.

He adjusted, sliding his hands lower—resting at Gen's hips—before ducking his arms underneath the mentalist's and pulling him in again. This time, his arms wrapped around Gen properly, his forehead pressing against Gen's shoulder.

Ten billion percent better. He could *feel* the difference—especially in the sharp, tired breath Gen let out before finally, finally wrapping his arms around Senku in return. It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't showy. But it was firm. Settling. Senku let himself lean into it. Yeah, he could definitely feel the chemical response he'd cited earlier—oxytocin, dopamine, the whole cocktail—spreading low and warm in his chest. He sank into it without hesitation. He'd say he could get used to this, but honestly? Something that felt *this* good probably wasn't something a person *got used to*. It stayed good. Every time.

Why did people settle for just hand-holding when *this* was on the table? Not that hand-holding was bad. He liked it when Gen absentmindedly played with his fingers, like he didn't even realize he was doing it. That was nice, too.

Senku didn't know how long they stayed like that. He had no plans to break it, no real concept of time passing—but eventually, Gen shifted. Stepped back. And to Senku's quiet disappointment, crossed the room to the lab table and took the seat he'd claimed over the last few nights. Still, his eyes were a little more expressive now. The mask was cracking.

Senku huffed out a quiet laugh. It almost felt like dodging a bullet.

Time for the next move.

He stepped forward, sliding into the seat opposite Gen. They faced each other in silence for a beat.

"You know it was the best—" Senku started, voice even.

Gen cut him off with a dismissive flick of his wrist. "Don't be silly, Senku-chan. I *know* it was the best you could do at the time. That doesn't mean the thought of it—or watching it—wasn't hard. I just…" His voice softened. "I wish I'd been there."

Senku's brow twitched. "What could you have even done differently?"

Gen smiled, but it wasn't a kind smile. It was sharp. Calculated. Dangerous in the way that made Senku's pulse do something unfamiliar even to when they had been planning a war together, "I would've dismantled his psyche so thoroughly, he would've joined his sister in a catatonic state until I decided I was emotionally prepared to forgive him. And put him back together. Which—let's be honest—would've been never."

Senku blinked.

Then grinned.

"That's kinda hot," he said, completely unashamed.

Gen's eye twitched. Literally twitched. Which—honestly—was kind of cute. Senku was ten billion percent sure the expression on his own face right now was probably *sickening* to look at from the outside. And sure enough, Gen ran a hand down his face and waved the other in the air like he was shooing a fly, his usual playful energy making a reappearance, "Stop looking at me like that, Senku-chan~! I'm trying to have an adult conversation here!"

Well, that was probably a good sign. "Looking at you like *what*, Mentalist?"

If he was wearing a stupid expression anyway, he might as well use it to further his plans.

"Like—" Gen started, then paused before shaking his head, exasperated. "You're too much sometimes, Senku-chan. It almost feels like you're trying to pull me into your pace. Where *did* you learn that?"

He knew damn well.

"Well, Dr. Asagiri," Senku drawled, "I can think of a few essays and books that may have shaped that mindset—"

Gen's face fell. Which was *abnormal*. Every other time Senku had mentioned his undeniably attractive academic past, Gen had practically *preened*. This time? Not so much.

"Mentalist?" Senku asked, brow furrowing.

Gen huffed a quiet breath. "So… the plan you made—was it based on my work? Just the theories? Nothing else?"

Stupid, illogical Mentalist. He was lucky Senku was already so attached to him, or that line of reasoning would've been a complete turnoff. A dry, mildly irritated edge crept into Senku's voice.

"Let's remember," He said, "That without that information, I would've ten billion percent died to Tsukasa."

"Gee, thanks, Senku-chan. I wasn't *completely* aware of that already," Gen snapped back, that adorable eye twitch returning with flair.

This conversation was *not* going where Senku needed it to go. He pressed his index finger to his forehead in frustration. Dealing with people wasn't exactly his strong suit, and the last thing he wanted was for Gen to spiral into some ridiculous guilt loop—but he had no idea how to push past it in a socially acceptable way. Well... Gen liked him for *being* him, right? So the odds were decent that whatever he said next, *as long as it was honest*, would probably be fine.

"So," Senku said, deadpan, "Do you want to kiss me yet, Mentalist?"

…

Really?

That was where his mouth decided to go with this? Senku swallowed, trying not to look as immediately regretful as he felt. Gen was staring at him, wide-eyed—definitely better than sarcastic and biting, but not exactly ideal.

"…I have to admit, Senku-chan," Gen said at last, voice unusually steady. A flush was creeping across his cheeks. "I'm at a bit of a loss here."

Okay. Well. That could've gone worse.

"Sorry, Mentalist. My brain's a little scattered right now. Not that I don't want you to kiss me, but… that wasn't what I meant to say—" He stumbled, and Gen's lips curled into a slow, dangerous grin—the kind that sent a shiver straight down Senku's spine. He was suddenly very aware that if he tried to say anything else, it would just be some kind of poetic rambling about how unreasonably good Gen looked like that. How cunning. How unfair.

"You want a kiss, Senku-chan?" Gen purred, eyes bright with mischief. "Why not just take one, then? You know I'd be hard pressed to refuse you~."

Ah. There it was.

The smug chirping meant the Mentalist was definitely back on his A-game.

But Senku had chosen a strategy, and he wasn't about to abandon it.

"Not a chance," He shot back. "You're gonna kiss me first, Mentalist."

A challenge.

The last trace of guilt vanished from Gen's expression, replaced by something far sharper. That spark of challenge lit up his entire face, and Senku realized Gen hadn't picked up on the

game before—not because he couldn’t, but because he’d been too busy spiraling into unneeded guilt.

Now? Now he looked alive.

“A game like this, with a Mentalist?” Gen purred, tipping his head to the side. “Are you sure, Senku-chan? You’ll lose, you know.”

Senku rarely lost anything he set his mind to—and he certainly wasn’t about to start now. But even if he did lose, the end result would be the same. The only variable was how long it took and who got to brag about it. Besides, it gave him more time to observe Taiju and Yuzuriha. To figure out how relationships worked, so he wouldn’t be a complete disaster when he and Gen eventually—hopefully—ended up in one... Did admitting they both wanted to kiss each other count as being in one?

He shook the thought off.

“I never lose, Mentalist,” Senku said, voice firm. “With the diligent application of science, anything is possible.”

The words tasted heavier than expected—an echo of his old man—but he pushed that aside and focused on the here and now. The air between them buzzed, quiet but charged. Gen didn’t blink. Neither did Senku. They were still locked in that challenge, breaths leveled out, the edges of something bigger curling at the corners of their expressions—but neither of them moved.

“Senku~! Gen~! I’m back!”

The voice hit them like a pebble tossed into a still pond. Suika’s footsteps padded in from the hall a moment later, her melon-helmet bobbing slightly askew as she peeked through the lab door. The villagers didn't exactly have much concept of knocking, so it wasn't surprising that she didn't. Senku blinked once. Gen sat back just a little, the tension smoothing out of his shoulders—though the sly smirk stayed firmly in place.

“Suika,” Senku said, voice shifting into the steadier and a little more nonchalant, like it could hide how effected he was, “You're back early.”

“It’s *late!*” She corrected, a little breathless. “I came straight here like I was supposed to! I have *so much* to report!”

Senku wasn't going to lie, he had completely forgotten about the fact that he was going to have Suika spy on some of the more problematic members of their little nation.

Gen chuckled, leaning back in his chair as the air between them cooled. “Ah, our junior correspondent returns~ What thrilling secrets have you uncovered tonight, dear Suika, have the brutes done anything out of order than either I or Senku need to deal with?"

“Three minor incidents, one semi-major, and *two* weird things I don’t fully understand but I think you should!”

Gen leaned in slightly, amused. “You hear that, Senku-chan? Two weird things. Surely that falls under *your* department.”

He was glad for the distraction. Glad for her timing, even if it shattered the tension from before. His body was still humming with leftover chemical signals—stress, adrenaline, whatever you called wanting to kiss someone and having it interrupted by a ten-year-old informant, “I’ll be the judge of what’s weird. Start with the semi-major one.”

Suika nodded, posture straightening like she was reporting to a commander. “Kinro caught two people stealing rice. Not much, just a handful, but he made them sweep ash out of the fire pits for the rest of the day. One of them tried to lie about it.”

Senku hummed. “Rules are the rules, huh.... Who did it?”

“Just some of the older villagers," She said carefully. “NThey didn't really mean anything by it... But Kinro was *really* mad.”

Gen’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Hmm. Food theft, wonder what made them think they needed to do that.”

“It’s just little bits!” Suika insisted. “But people are getting kind of... Nervous. One lady said she thinks the revived people get better food, but that’s not true!”

“No,” Senku confirmed, "And if anyone’s spreading that, we shut it down fast. There are reasons why they are thinking that way, I'll talk with the Mentalist about it after. What else?”

Suika leaned in, lowering her voice. “Okay, the weird stuff. One: Ginro’s been wandering off to the forest a lot again.”

Senku frowned. “How far?”

“Not super far. Just past the field. But it’s weird because he *was* scared to leave camp last week, and now he won’t explain why he keeps going. Said he’s training. But he didn’t bring a stick or anything.”

Gen tilted his head. “Strange for Ginro to be doing anything voluntarily.”

Suika nodded, pleased to be taken seriously. “And two: Ruri asked if we could make a better kind of water basin with a smoother surface. She didn’t say why, but she looked *really* serious.”

Senku tapped his fingers in thought, “Noted. We’ll deal with it tomorrow. You did good, Suika.”

She beamed. “You’re going to bed soon, right?”

Gen stretched, glancing at Senku. “Well, we *were* heading toward sleep... eventually.”

“After,” Senku said dryly, “We talk about how to handle handle food laundering and unlicensed forest wanderers.”

“Okay! I’ll see you guys for the next report tomorrow!” Suika chirped, rolling out of the room like a tumbleweed—and somehow still managing to slam the door shut behind her. Senku stared after her. Honestly, he wished he could get an X-ray of her joints. The kid had to be triple-jointed at minimum. Silence settled in her absence, calm and unspoken. Both of them stayed looking at the door for a second too long.

Senku’s thoughts drifted back to her report. The food problem was the most serious issue, but... it wasn’t going to spiral out of control. Not with Gen around. That kind of subtle unrest? He’d have it handled in one morning.

“Think it’s because of Francois testing recipes for the expedition?” Gen asked, casual—like he didn’t already know the answer.

Senku nodded anyway.

“Handle that tomorrow evening for me, won’t you, Mentalist?”

Gen narrowed his eyes slightly. “Always so willing to delegate, Senku-chan.”

“You’re the best person for the job. Can’t help that you’re our only certified manipulator,” Senku replied with a shrug. “But no, just focus on the food situation. I’ll look into whatever our blonde idiot is doing in the woods.”

Gen tilted his head. “Wouldn’t someone like Kohaku be better for that?”

Senku snorted. “I’m not sending her in case he’s doing something weirdly desperate. Like, I don’t know, masturbating in the middle of the trees or something equally Ginro.”

Gen choked on a laugh. “God. Okay. Looks like we’ve got a long day tomorrow. We should get some sleep. *Especially* you. You won’t be able to win our little game if you’re tired.”

“Ten billion percent inaccurate,” Senku declared. “Also, I call bottom bunk.”

He dropped onto it without another word.

There was a pause.

“Guess we’ll be sharing a bunk soon enough,” Gen murmured, wickedly sweet. “You can have this win for now. The real win’s coming—when *you* break and kiss *me*.”

Not happening.

But… even as Senku thought it, he caught a glimpse of Gen standing there—eyes soft, silhouette framed by low light. He did look really...

Senku rolled sharply to face the wall. “Goodnight, Mentalist.”

Another laugh, gentler this time. “Goodnight, Senku-chan… And thank you. For distracting me from my stupid guilt.”

Senku rolled his eyes, unseen.

But he didn’t argue.

Gen climbed onto the top bunk with exaggerated care, the wooden frame creaking beneath him in protest. He winced at the sound, gritting his teeth as if he could shame it into silence, then slumped dramatically onto his stomach with a muffled groan. He flipped onto his back and stared at the ceiling, lips twitching despite himself. His chest still felt warm. Not romantic-violin warm—more like his whole brain had been dunked in sunlight. He wanted to kick his legs. Laugh into the pillow. Scream. Possibly all three.

Senku wanted to kiss him. Had said as much. Out loud. In that weird, completely unromantic Senku way that somehow still made Gen feel like he was melting from the inside out.

He let out a sound halfway between a sigh and a giggle, clapping a hand over his mouth immediately afterward in case Senku heard.

But after the high started to fade, something quieter crept in. A kind of fuzzy uncertainty. Not bad—not like the earlier guilt—but the kind of mental noise that came when too many good things landed all at once and his brain didn't quite know what shelf to put them on. He wanted to think it through properly. Not just bask in it (well, maybe a little basking). Just… sort the pieces. Make sure he wasn't missing something.

For now, though?

He buried his face into the pillow and let the giddy grin return.

He was definitely winning this little competition. The thought of Senku actually breaking and deciding to kiss him? It was too good. Looks like he would have to turn this up a notch.

... Did this mean that they were already together?

He took a deep breath and calmed his heart rate, willing himself to sleep.

The room had that soft murmur of anticipation again, the quiet before the playback resumed. Ukyo settled into his usual chair a few minutes early, arms folded as his eyes swept over the mostly empty space. It wouldn't stay that way for long.

He'd slept fine. Better than expected, even. But he hadn't been able to stop thinking about the things he'd overheard.

Last night, tucked just out of sight near the lab, Ukyo had heard everything. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop. It had just... happened. Not his fault the acoustics in the ship were great, or that his earing was so good, or that Suika's voice carried so well. So yes, he’d heard her breathless report. The food shortages. Ginro behaving strangely. Stuff that Senku and Gen would typically take care of pretty easily, so he wasn't particularly worried about it.

But it was the relationship conversation after that stuck with him for all its fumbling cuteness.

Gen’s voice, playful but fragile. Senku’s unusual attempts at comfort. Their banter, light and sharp as ever, but with something real threaded beneath it in their voices. The kind of honesty that only slipped out when people thought no one else was listening. He’d caught Senku's teasing challenge—the one about Gen kissing him first. And Gen’s startled pause, like he genuinely hadn’t expected Senku to say it out loud. He’d even caught the edge of guilt in Gen’s voice when he realized Senku’s survival plan had been based on *his* books.

They'd worked through it. In their own weird way. And as far as Ukyo could tell, they were probably better for it. Or at least, back on whatever crooked track counted as progress for those two.

He’d barely had time to process all of that before hearing Taiju and Yuzuriha curled up in the corner of the shared cabin, whispering softly. Laughing. They were sickeningly adorable.

Ukyo hadn’t said anything. Just smiled quietly and gone to bed.

So now he sat here, arms folded, thinking about all of it: Taiju and Yuzuriha in love, Senku and Gen on the verge of something, Suika playing spy for the greater good. A soft smile played on his lips before he could stop it.

"What's got you all smirking?" Ryusui's voice snapped into his ear as he dropped into the seat beside him with a grin.

Ukyo tilted his head but didn't turn. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Ryusui gasped like he'd been mortally wounded. "I *would!* I *desire* to know!" He thumped a fist to his chest with flair. "Don't tell me you're sitting here hoarding juicy secrets. Hoarding things is *my* job."

Ukyo raised a single eyebrow, letting the silence do the talking.

Ryusui slumped dramatically in his seat. "You're the worst. Francois, tell him he's the worst."

Francois bowed, "Please don't listen to Master Ryusui, his childishness gets the best of him sometimes."

"Hey!"

Ukyo chuckled and glanced forward as the last of their crew filtered in. Playback was going to resume soon. Whatever came next... he was ready to watch it unfold. The break had done him some good, now... It was time to see Tsukasa's deplorable actions again.

Playback Resumes

Senku, I have a feeling that if we had met each other 3700 years ago, we would have been friends.

Tsukasa could see it. Clear as day. A memory that never happened but felt more real than some of the ones that had.

He imagined himself standing in front of Senku and Taiju, a line of school bullies sneering in front of them. Taiju wouldn't hit back—he never did—but Tsukasa could. He pictured himself stepping forward, shoving the kids away before they could land a blow, before they could kick over the fragile machine that Senku had spent hours building. In this false memory, the invention didn't break. Tsukasa saved it. He saved them.

There was a long pause in the room after it faded.

"…Okay, that's a little disturbing," Senku finally said, voice dry as ever, chin in hand like he was reading a mildly disappointing lab report. "Not even judging, it's just—weird."

"Mm," Gen hummed, fingers steepled. "Delusions rooted in wish fulfillment usually are."

Senku tilted his head toward him. "And how does your soft science explain this one, Mentalist?"

Gen smirked faintly. "Glad you asked. In psychological terms? What we're witnessing is likely a vivid confabulation event—essentially a constructed memory used to fill in emotional or narrative gaps. It is weird that it presents without any sort of trauma to the head or dementia, but psychology is an evolving science and that is how I had visualized those types of delusions looking. In this case, the brain's trying to rewrite history to create coherence or reduce guilt. In this case, I'd wager it's a mix of survivor's guilt, cognitive dissonance, and a little bit of nostalgic overcompensation."

He gestured idly toward the now-black screen. "Tsukasa's convinced himself that if the world had been different, so would he. That he *could have* been a protector, a friend. It's not uncommon in people who've committed morally questionable actions to create alternate realities where they made different choices—or had different circumstances that 'excused' the ones they did make."

“Sounds like a convenient way to feel better about attempted murder,” Kohaku muttered.

“To be fair,” Gen added, tone lighter now, “He *is* repressing a massive amount of trauma. The mind can do some impressive gymnastics when it’s trying to dodge that kind of weight.”

Ryusui leaned back with a snort. “So what I’m hearing is: he’s cracked.”

“Not cracked,” Gen corrected with a flutter of fingers. “Just… patching reality to keep functioning. We all do it. Some of us just do it with more style.”

Senku gave a noncommittal grunt and turned back toward the screen, expression unreadable. “Still kind of a weird thing to hallucinate.”

The other two childhood friends stayed silent for now, though there was a little weirdness painted on their expressions as well.

> He saw himself carrying lumber with Taiju, hefting it over one shoulder as they made their way to Senku’s cramped apartment. Taiju’s grin lit up the room when they walked in—Senku’s hands already greasy from wires and soldering. They were building something, always building something. And Tsukasa helped. He could almost hear the clink of parts being passed between them.

It was the sort of nostalgic warmth that belonged in a 90s commercial for friendship bracelets. If it hadn’t been so deeply rooted in attempted murder, Gen might’ve actually called it charming.

Senku gave a soft snort. “Well. At least he knows he’d be relegated to lab assistant.”

Gen bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. He kind of wanted to reach out for Senku's hand but giving into the urge to touch like that wasn't exactly going to win him the

competition of Senku wasn't more effected by it than he was... Gen had a feeling that when it came to things like that, he would always be the more effected one, it was just the way that Senku's sexuality worked, so those soft moments might be pleasant, but they would bring Gen closer to losing. No. Gen needed to play into something else... He shook his head and refocused himself, “You say that like it wouldn’t suit him.”

“Not the point, Mentalist.”

Ukyo, from his corner, tilted his head slightly. “Is that… actually realistic? What you looked like back then?”

Senku blinked once. Then nodded. “Yeah. Actually, it’s not far off.” His voice had shifted—analytical, curious about the data even if the source was delusional. “It’s probably a reconstruction. Mixed input from Taiju and Yuzuriha’s memories with my own. The brain’s good at filling in blanks with borrowed accuracy.”

He scratched behind his ear with the same hand that had once been stone. “If it had just been *his* memory? I’d probably have had two strands of hair over my eye the whole time. That’s how he always saw me—nothing else would’ve registered.”

He gave a faint shrug. “Ten billion points for bringing that up.”

> In his mind, Mirai was there too—leading them all down the sidewalk with her quiet steps, as if they had always belonged together. Taiju carried one of Senku’s robots, chattering about how one day it might walk on Mars. Senku promised it would. And Tsukasa... Tsukasa believed him.

“Heh,” Senku said beside him, leaning back with a cocky little grin that was all sharpness and pride, “I’m starting to like the idea of being his childhood friend a little more. I don’t hate this kind of thought process.”

“Of course you don’t,” Gen drawled, letting the words settle with amusement. “It’s full of unwavering belief in your inevitable success.”

“Exactly,” Senku said, smug as ever. “Even in his fake childhood memories, he’s betting everything on my inventions.”

“Tragic delusions and blind faith,” Gen whistled low under his breath. “No wonder you’re flattered.”

Senku shrugged, shameless. “Hey, if someone’s gonna hallucinate me into their trauma recovery, the least they can do is let me be the genius anchor of their worldview. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t find it flattering, Mentalist.”

Gen grinned, never one to pass up an easy point. “Oh, I don’t need Tsukasa for that. I already have someone with delusionally blind faith in my brilliance—and that’s *you*, Senku-chan. I’ve got the best version already.”

Senku wrinkled his nose in mock distaste. “I’m hardly delusional.”

“Oh, I don’t know…” Ukyo chimed in smoothly, from just a little down the row. “The amount of trust you place in him could be *construed* as such.”

Gen turned, eyes bright. “See? I’ve always liked you, Ukyo-kun. Truly. A man of reason and excellent insight.”

> Senku created monitoring equipment just for him in this version of the world. Lightweight sensors that tracked Tsukasa’s vitals, optimizing every part of his training—science as devotion, friendship as innovation. Tsukasa used that data to climb higher in his sport, and he always came back to Senku’s window, knocking once to deliver results, grateful every time.

“Now he’s just being greedy,” Senku scoffed lightly, arms crossing with casual arrogance. “A whole project just to improve his performance? I would *never* do something like that.”

“Huh?” Taiju blinked, clearly caught off guard. “Didn’t we do something kinda like that for Byakuya back in the day?”

Senku froze.

Yuzuriha gave a soft little gasp of realization. Gen's grin started crawling across his face before he could stop it.

“Oh?” Gen hummed, leaning forward with mock curiosity. “Do tell, Senku-chan~ What was *that* about?”

Senku clicked his tongue and glanced away, the tips of his ears betraying him with a faint flush. “That was different,” he muttered. “And if it’s important, the TV’ll show it eventually.”

That smug tone Gen used was dangerous—dangerous in the way it made Senku’s pulse pick up for no logical reason. Annoying. Strategic. Effective. So, Senku reached over and grabbed Gen’s hand without ceremony. If he was lucky, maybe the Mentalist would start playing with his fingers again. That had been unexpectedly pleasant yesterday—calming in a way he hadn’t anticipated. And sure, it was a bit of a “relationship” move, but it didn’t make him want to kiss Gen, so it was fair game in their little competition.

...And if *it did* make Gen want to kiss *him*, well. That was just efficient progress toward the end goal.

> He imagined the four of them as mini astronauts now—not just the three dolls that Senku had sent up as children. This time, there was a fourth. One with darker hair, long hair. Tsukasa had never actually been there. But in this imagined world, he was loved. Included. At peace.
>
> The warmth of it almost made him believe it had been real.
>
> And then—
>
> Senku’s body crumpled to the forest floor.

Playback Resumes in 5 Minutes

Senku winced. “Okay, now this is just getting extra. We already saw this part—why the hell did it have to pause *there*?”

His words were dry, sharp, meant to cut the tension. But it didn’t quite work. The room had gone still again. Tense. Even Gen’s hand had stiffened slightly in his grasp, the comfort from earlier suddenly laced with static. Senku didn’t let go. He didn’t squeeze tighter either. Just held on—like a placeholder for normalcy. He hated this part. Hated how drawn-out it was. The playback dragging its feet like it wanted them to *feel* it. As if they hadn’t already. As if the still frame of his crumpled body wasn’t dramatic enough. Taiju and Yuzuriha shouldn't have to see this again.

Behind him, he could hear Taiju’s breath hitch. Yuzuriha shifted her weight. Kohaku’s jaw clenched.

At least it would be a short break, and they could move to get this over with.

Chapter End Notes

I also do want to thank everyone for always being so amazing in their support of this story, I'm a little slow to respond to the comments but please know they fuel me like no ones business and I look back on them all the time. I adore all of you guys thank you so much for all the support so far and I absolutely love writing this story for you. Thank yooouuuuuu <3 <3 <3

Chapter 20: Episode 5 Part 2

Chapter by orphan_account

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn't take long for the playback to restart.

Senku wasn't sure why it had paused there to begin with—right on that dramatic, inconvenient still frame of his own body slumped over like a discarded mannequin. The timing was almost *theatrical*.

Ukyo, ever the one to quietly shoulder tension, had busied himself making tea. The rest of the group just… drifted. Each person picked a spot on the floor or wall to stare at and let their thoughts carry them off. Quiet, heavy air hung over the room.

Gen, though—Senku glanced down at their loosely connected hands. Something small that could comfort Gen a little bit was definitely a good idea. He had given his hands and fingers an almost absent minded massage the other day... So Senku, with very little experience and even less social instinct, tried to mimic it. He shifted slightly, then began lightly running his thumb over each of Gen's fingers one by one, slow and deliberate. Rubbed at the base, traced the length. Technically, this might qualify as a massage. Probably. Sort of.

Gen exhaled—just barely—but the tension eased from his shoulders almost immediately.

Heh.

Senku allowed himself the smallest smirk. *Fascinating.* The effect he had on Gen… it was something he wanted to study. Not just observe, but *understand*—the mechanisms of comfort, the variables of touch, the emotional triggers that produced that kind of reaction. But now was *definitely* not the time to dive into that particular line of thought.

The screen sputtered, crackled, and flared to life again.

Back to business.

> Taiju ran. Faster than he ever had before. His heart thundered in his chest, too fast, too loud. He already knew—he knew—he wouldn't make it in time. That he was too late. But his legs kept moving anyway.
>
> Ahead of him, Senku collapsed.
>
> Slumped forward like something had just… stopped. No resistance. No fight left in him. Senku would've had something to say about the what way the body was falling, or the way gravity worked on a falling body, or how to calculate how the fall was happening—but he couldn't.
>
> Because he was on the ground.
>
> Taiju skidded to a halt, knees nearly buckling as he dropped beside him, arms scooping Senku up without thinking.

Francois' voice broke the quiet, soft but unwavering.

"If I may offer a note on emergency procedure, in case a similar situation were to for occur."

Everyone turned—grateful, perhaps, for something practical to focus on.

"In the event of suspected spinal trauma," Francois said, hands folded neatly in front of them, "The worst possible thing one can do is move the victim. Especially not by the torso, and *certainly* not without stabilizing the neck."

Taiju flinched. Francois gave him a brief glance but didn't sound judgmental—just clinical. Teaching. "I understand why you acted the way you did. I say this not to scold you, but to inform everyone just in case. Shock often overrides protocol. But were this a real injury—without the… circumstances that later unfold—moving Senku that way could have permanently damaged his spinal cord, assuming it wasn't already severed."

“I didn’t think—” Taiju’s voice cracked. “I just… I thought I had to *get him away*—”

“And that instinct is deeply human,” Francois replied gently. “But knowledge tempers instinct. In emergencies, stillness can save a life as much as action. Especially when the neck is involved.”

Yuzuriha reached out, quietly lacing her fingers with Taiju’s.

“Ten billion percent accurate,” Senku added dryly from where he sat, though his tone was surprisingly soft. “Not to worry, big oaf. The damage was already done. No extra harm from your dramatics. In fact, if you didn't do what you did in this particular situation, we would have been dead. In this case, you did everything right.”

Senku had to admit though, he had been proud of how quickly they had managed to figure everything out. He had planned for it, yes, but that didn't make the result any less impressive.

> He wanted to shake him. To jolt him back. To do something. But somewhere in the back of his mind—dim and distant—he remembered Senku telling him not to do that. That it was dangerous. That it could make things worse.
>
> Why couldn’t he remember the exact words?
>
> Why was everything so faint?
>
> His throat ached. It felt like it had closed in on itself.
>
> His face was wet again.
>
> And Senku wasn’t moving.
>
> "SENKU!"

Senku swallowed hard. There was something about hearing Taiju’s voice like *that*—cracked open with pain, so raw and desperate—that hit him square in the chest, even now. Even knowing it had worked. Even knowing they’d gotten out. *Urgh.* This sucked. Ten billion percent *necessary*, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. He hated knowing he’d caused *them* pain. It twisted something deep inside him.

And then, without a word, the situation quietly reversed.

It was Gen playing with *his* fingers now. The shift was so natural it took Senku a second to register it—slow motions, soft pressure over each joint, and damn it, *okay,* yeah, he definitely understood now. That was why Gen had relaxed so quickly earlier. The tension bled out of his shoulders like it had been waiting for permission.

Gen leaned in, voice low near his ear. “Taiju’s not the type to dwell on guilt, so don’t worry yourself.”

Senku snorted. “Wasn’t that serious.”

And it wasn’t. What was done was done, and he *knew* Taiju. There was no universe where that idiot wouldn’t have picked him up and cried over him—no timeline where Taiju would’ve prioritized stillness over trying to save his best friend’s life. That’s just who he was.

Still. This mood needed breaking.

“Thanks for not shaking me around like a sack of potatoes, big oaf,” Senku said dryly, voice just loud enough to carry across the room. “I don’t know if I’d survive watching that.”

Taiju looked up sharply, blinking hard, and let out a choked little laugh that barely held.

Then—

“So…” Chrome piped up, half confused, half awed, and a little horrified. “Senku actually *died.* Like… *actually* died. How…?”

“Don’t rush the spoilers,” Senku cut in, not even looking at him. “It’ll show on the screen. No point explaining everything right away.”

Ukyo was silent, arms folded, eyes shaded with something like quiet grief.

From the other side of the room, Ryusui leaned forward. “But I *desire* to know now!”

Senku sighed amused, as he tended to be with a lot of Ryusui's antics, especially when they were purposely crafted to continue the mode breaking effect of Senku's own words, the man wasn't fooling anyone, well, at least not fooling him or the Mentalist, the others, maybe, “Too bad, capitalist. You can wait just like everyone else.”

> Was he screaming?
>
> He couldn’t even tell.
>
> Senku’s head didn’t carry its own weight in his arms. His mouth hung slack in a way Taiju knew for a fact not even a sleeping Senku ever did. His eyes—wide, unfocused, unseeing—stared straight through him. Yuzuriha’s cries pierced the air somewhere behind him, echoing, sharp, endless. Taiju’s face was wet again.
>
> “Senku! Please! Answer me, Senku!”

Ukyo let out a shaky breath before he could stop it.

It was… horrifying. There was no better word. Seeing a person go limp like that never led to good memories for him—but seeing *Senku* like that? Macabre at best. Ghastly, even. It didn’t look like him anymore. Not really. Senku was never that still. There was always movement—some twitch of the hand, some restless adjustment of weight, some flick of the eyes calculating a billion things at once.

But now?

Now there was nothing.

And even though Ukyo *knew*—knew intellectually—that Senku would recover somehow, the image still hit too hard. Too real. Too familiar. If he had to guess—and he wasn't Gen, but he liked to think he was observant—Senku probably moved so much to remind himself he wasn't petrified anymore. That he *wasn't* frozen in place and counting years in silence. That thought didn't feel particularly comforting either.

Behind him, Yuzuriha was crying again. Taiju too. It wasn't as loud as the audio coming from the screen, but it was no less gutting. The tears of people reliving a moment they never really got to *process* the first time. Kohaku and Chrome were quite irregular, which was normal in situations like this. Ryusui and Francois remained composed. Measured. Ryusui's heart rate stayed weirdly steady, like he was forcing himself to observe before reacting. Francois, of course, was unreadable. Calm. Grounded.

Ukyo focused on their pulses. It helped drown out the sobs. Let the grief fade to the edges of his perception.

> He blinked hard, trying to escape it—hoping it would reset, that if he closed his eyes and opened them fast enough it would all go away. But when he looked down again… his friend was still there.
>
> Still.
>
> Still a body and not a life. There was no way. It wasn't possible. Senku wouldn't let it end like this. Not between them. Not without some kind of backup plan. He always had a backup plan, "Open your eyes! Wake up and say something! Come on, this can't be right. There's no way! After everything you've done—you can't just die! Talk to me!"
>
> *Shut up, you big oaf.*
>
> He could almost hear it. Could feel it—like Senku was just out of reach, ready to pop up and scold him. He needed that voice.

The silence in the room was suffocating.

Onscreen, Taiju's voice cracked, broken and raw, and Senku could feel the secondhand pain crawl up the back of his neck. It was hard to look directly at it—at *him*—kneeling there, begging like that. It made something tighten behind Senku's ribs, like a string pulled too taut. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. It *hurt* to watch. That was his best friend up

there. The guy who'd never hesitated, never slowed down, never once thought of himself before the people he cared about. Seeing him like that—desperate, crumbling, hands shaking around a body he couldn't save—wasn't easy.

And yet…

Senku exhaled slowly through his nose.

He could admit it—just to himself, *quietly*—that there was something slightly, darkly absurd about it too.

Taiju, of all people, was now having *delusional hallucinations* of Senku's voice yelling at him from beyond the grave.

Really? Both him *and* Tsukasa? Was this going to be a thing now?

He might've found it funny.

Might've.

But the difference was, Taiju actually knew him. Had for years. And that version of his voice, the one Taiju could almost *hear*—that was something real. Familiar. Earned.

Which meant it wasn't funny.

Not really.

Just sad.

Senku shifted slightly in his seat, eyes dropping to the floor as he gave a soft, almost inaudible sigh.

"…Great," He muttered to no one in particular. "Now I feel bad for laughing in my own head. Thanks, big oaf."

> "I gave him a painless death. It's over," Came a voice from behind—his voice. Calm. Certain. Cold. "I trust that, as his friends, you'll give him a proper burial."
>
> Taiju's whole body tensed.
>
> That feeling— It surged through him, hot and suffocating. He wanted to launch forward. He wanted to throw a punch that broke everything. His grip on Senku's jacket tightened until his fingers ached, the leathers biting into his palms.
>
> Don't be stupid.
>
> Don't be illogical, you big oaf.
>
> You'd lose.
>
> You couldn't hurt a fly, remember?
>
> Senku would say all of that right now. Ten billion percent. He'd call him an idiot for even thinking it.
>
> Calm down.
>
> Calm down.
>
> He couldn't.

Senku couldn't help it—he kept watching. Eyes fixed to the screen as he blinked hard, trying to keep the sting from turning into anything visible. Moisture didn't suit him. Not in front of *everyone.* Not again, so soon after the last time. But still… Taiju. Out of all the people Senku had ever known, Taiju was the most *non-violent* human on Earth. The guy who wouldn't swat a fly. The very idea that he'd come *close* to breaking that—close to losing control because *Senku died*—that wasn't something Senku had accounted for.

Wasn't something he'd even considered as a possibility.

“Tsukasa is quite cold when it comes to his goals,” Ryusui said suddenly, breaking the quiet with his usual boldness. There was a trace of something almost admiring in his voice—approval wrapped in analysis.

Senku blinked, pulled out of his thoughts. Yeah… he couldn’t deny it. He didn’t *hate* that about Tsukasa either. The man’s ruthless focus was, in some ways, a strength. A terrifying one. But a strength nonetheless. When it wasn’t aimed at *him*, anyway.

Kohaku, however, had clearly heard the same thing—and had *not* taken it the same way.

“Is now really the time for that?” she asked sharply, arms folded tight across her chest. Her glare had enough heat to spark a forest fire. Her eyes drifting over to the quietly crying Taiju and Yuzuriha.

Senku rolled one shoulder in a half-shrug. “Tsukasa really *is* good at going after his goals. Can’t deny that.”

From beside him, he could *feel* the exasperation even before the words came.

Gen let out a sigh that might as well have been a full-body eye roll. “You would like that about him.”

But he had to.

He could feel his own face now—dry, stiff. He wanted to turn around, to snap, to use this anger that was flowing through him.

Think.

Think.

Can’t attack. Can’t win. It won’t fix anything.

Yuzuriha.

He blinked toward her, a sharp breath rattling in his chest. Gently, with trembling hands, Taiju laid Senku down on the ground. His friend—his best friend. Still, silent, and far too light in his arms. Then he stood. There was no way Senku would do this to them. No way he'd just… leave. Not without something in place. Senku always had a backup plan. Always. There had to be something he knew that they didn't.

They just needed time.

Even knowing the outcome—knowing that Senku *had* come back, that everything had somehow worked out—Gen still felt something twist in his chest at the sheer denial on Taiju's face. And it wasn't irrational. In the moment, denial like that didn't count as unhealthy. Not really. Shock did strange things to the mind, even to strong ones. People needed something to cling to. It just so happened that, this time, denial had *actually* worked out in their favor.

Gen tried not to look at the screen.

He really did.

But it was hard to ignore. Taiju gently laying Senku down, like he was made of glass—Senku, who was *never*— It didn't look like him. It looked like a puppet someone had let go of mid-sentence. Blank. Cold. Eyes too wide, mouth too loose. It was… *wrong.*

That was what Senku would look like when he died.

And Gen's well-trained professionalism—the part of him that could observe and analyze anything without breaking—wavered. Just a little.

His fingers tightened instinctively around Senku's.

"What the hell, Mentalist?" Senku's voice came out quiet. Almost too quiet to hear. But it was real. And warm. And *alive.*

Gen didn't answer right away. Just focused on the pulse he could feel now beneath his palm —small, steady, undeniable. Then he smiled, soft and overly sweet, the mask slipping back into place like it had never cracked. "Hmm? Is something wrong, Senku-chan?"

There was a pause.

"…No," Senku said at last.

And then—surprisingly gentle—he rubbed his thumb over the back of Gen's hand. It wasn't much. Barely a motion. But it grounded him more effectively than any psych trick he could've pulled on himself. Senku, for all his logical quirks and hyperfixations, was *weirdly* open to public affection. Gen hadn't expected that. But he liked it. Liked that Senku wasn't pulling away—liked the weight of his hand as a tether, keeping him anchored when his thoughts threatened to spiral.

Right now, that contact was keeping him *here.*

And Gen found himself quietly grateful for it. Kind of a weird feeling too, since in order to be grateful about that, it meant that Senku had to have SEEN him, looked passed his masks and saw what Gen had needed, and it felt a little naked as much as it did intimate.

> Taiju's fists clenched at his sides. He had enough anger burning in him to be a convincing decoy if nothing else. He could buy Yuzuriha time. She would know what to do. She always did. He turned to the large boulder beside him and reached for it. His fingers were still trembling—rage, grief, helplessness—but he gripped it anyway. It was something to hold. Something he could throw.
>
> "What are you doing?" Yuzuriha asked behind him, voice tight with panic.
>
> He didn't look at her. Just said, "It's fine, Yuzuriha. I'm still thinking clearly. I can only hope…"
>
> "No," She said, softer now. Steady. "It's okay, Taiju."
>
> Relief crashed through him. She understood. Of course she did.

> He wasn’t good at plans. He never had been. But Senku was. And Yuzuriha—Yuzuriha could read the pieces and make sense of them like no one else. If they believed, then so would he. He swung the boulder around and launched it with all his strength. Because... He wasn't the smartest in their group—he’d never been. But he didn’t need to be. He was the muscle. The shield. The guy who lifted the heavy things and stood between his friends and danger. That was his job.

Taiju wasn’t the type to suffer from low self-esteem. Not outwardly, at least. But the way he spoke just now—about not being smart, not being the planner, just being the muscle—it sat wrong with Gen. There was a little too much resignation in it. Too much self-minimizing.

He leaned back slightly in his seat, mind already cataloguing the implications. It made him wonder how many of their jokes, their casual jabs, had slowly cemented that idea in Taiju’s head. *If* it had. Gen wasn’t sure. Taiju was resilient, emotionally buoyant in a way that Gen almost envied. But if that quiet acceptance of his "place" had turned into something more internalized… it would be worth poking at. Prodding gently.

Studying.

He’d wanted a contrast to his ongoing analysis of Senku’s psychological endurance during petrification. And who better than Taiju—the other one who’d endured it differently? The one whose coping came not from strategy or calculation, but from blind faith and unshakable loyalty. Perhaps a little ethically murky—especially since Gen had no intention of telling Taiju what he was being studied for—but it would be *for his own good.*

Besides, the license was long gone. And he was already going to hell with his scientist anyway. Might as well make it a well-documented descent.

Across the room, Francois’s voice cut gently through the mood. “It’s impressive how well you all know one another.”

Chrome sniffled, rubbing at his face, “It’s kinda beautiful… But also weird because of the circumstances.”

Yuzuriha and Taiju both smiled through their tears, eyes red but lighter now, softened by the unexpected praise. Taiju gave a crooked little grin—still a bit unsteady, but so much better than the shattered expression from earlier.

"Thank you!" he said, voice thick but bright.

> And Tsukasa wouldn't dare look away from him. Not if there was a chance Taiju might attack. That would give Yuzuriha time. Time to think. To move. To do something amazing, like she always did. This was going to work. It had to work. From the corner of his eye, he saw her run and reach for something—powder. Senku's powder.
>
> Taiju almost smiled.
>
> It was going to be okay. Just like Senku always said: science levels the playing field. And now, even without Senku awake to say it himself, his science would save them.
>
> It had to.
>
> "Goodbye, Tsukasa!" Taiju called.

Urgh.

It was *sickeningly* sweet.

Why did they have to put that much faith in him?

Senku ran a hand through his hair, but it didn't help settle the churn of emotions. Watching it on screen—seeing Taiju and Yuzuriha *trust* him like that, down to the wire, down to the powder he'd left behind—it was more than he'd prepped himself for. He'd believed in them. Ten billion percent. That wasn't the problem. But seeing it play out in real time… *watching* them solve the puzzle he'd left behind and justify the faith he'd placed in them?

It was a little overwhelming, even for him.

The versions that were with them in the room where looking at one another, expressions softened—those long, warm looks they exchanged like the world was tilting around them but they still had each other. That kind of connection was...

Hmmm.

Would Gen like to share looks like those?

They were too long. Definitely awkward. Right? It really wasn't the time for that thought—but *advancing the relationship* was important if he was going to win their bet. And clearly, Taiju and Yuzuriha gravitated closer every time they made those eye-contact-heavy, soul-baring gazes.

Could be an effective tactic.

Might be worth testing.

He stored it for future analysis.

> The explosion rocked the clearing, smoke and heat bursting like lightning in a summer storm—and Taiju ran. He scooped Senku up again without hesitation and bolted for the trees, Yuzuriha at his side. It was going to be okay.
>
> It had to be.

"Heh," Senku snorted, rubbing the back of his neck, "Can you imagine how badly that would've gone if Tsukasa had actually followed them? Ten billion percent game over."

The room turned as one.

Even *Gen* blinked slowly, like he wasn't sure if he was supposed to laugh or start planning damage control.

"Senku!" Taiju barked, half-standing out of reflex, face scrunched with a mix of horror and outrage. "That's *not funny!*"

He looked almost as mad as the time Senku had offhandedly implied that Yuzuriha might've had a dick. No one else looked particularly happy with him either. Kohaku looked about ready to jump across the room and use her gorilla patas to put some hurt on him.

"Pipe down, you big oaf," Senku muttered with a wave of his hand, "It's just a hypothetical."

"No one wants that hypothetical," Yuzuriha said gently, trying to calm Taiju with a hand on his arm.

> Taiju was holding Senku as they ran.
>
> She could see it—couldn't not see it. Senku's body was… flopping. Limp in Taiju's arms with every desperate stride. There was no tension in his limbs. No control. He moved only because Taiju moved. Yuzuriha's breath hitched, her lungs burning from the run, but it wasn't just that. It wasn't the exhaustion. If she hadn't needed the air to keep moving, she would've been sobbing.
>
> His eyes were still open. Staring at nothing. His mouth slightly parted, slack in a way that Senku's never was. Even asleep, he had a scowl or a mutter or a twitch of thought behind his expression. But now… Now he was still. Dry. No sweat. No breath. No fight. If he'd been running with them, he would've collapsed by now. But he hadn't. He'd already collapsed before they even started. He wasn't running. He wasn't doing anything.

Hearing her own thoughts echoed back at her on the screen, Yuzuriha couldn't help the choked sob that slipped out. She hadn't meant to make a sound—but there it was. Raw and sharp. It had been disturbing the first time, *living* it—seeing Senku limp like that, his body weightless in Taiju's arms like a broken marionette. But somehow, it was *worse* now. Watching it from the outside. Seeing it in clean, clinical framing. Even knowing he was alive—here, just a few feet from her, safe and snarking and fiddling with some new invention—it didn't undo the image.

Senku's body hadn't looked like Senku. That part still stung.

He was so *still.* So wrong.

Yuzuriha wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand and took a slow breath.

This was just like Senku, wasn't it? Not cruel, not exactly—but thoughtless in the way only a scientist could be. He'd probably helped send this playback knowing full well it would show things like this. Maybe he'd even known how much it would hurt them to relive it.

But if she had to guess, it was because he thought the bigger picture mattered more. Because they *had* to see it. Had to know all of it. That was *so* Senku.

Oddly, the thought calmed her.

The rest of the room was quiet—too quiet. No one really knew what to say. Their eyes flicked to the screen, then away. Even Chrome, who was usually eager to take in every detail, kept his head ducked. Ukyo's arms were crossed too tightly across his chest. Kohaku looked like she wanted to punch something, just to make the discomfort *move.*

> Taiju's voice cracked through the air. "It's gonna be okay, Senku! You said it yourself! If we have to run, then we have to do it together!"
>
> Yuzuriha let out a choked sob. Her vision blurred. She didn't know if it was tears or sweat or both. Her legs burned beneath her, but she kept running.
>
> Because if they stopped—if they really looked at him—
>
> If they admitted what was happening—
>
> She didn't want to know what would happen next.
>
> One of Senku's hands slipped free from Taiju's grip, flopping uselessly at his side as they ran. It swung with the motion. Loose. Heavy.

Wrong.

Please, she thought. Please. Please. Please be okay.

"I don't care what anyone says, you're not dying on me! I know you're alive!" Taiju cried out.

... He wasn't moving. He...

"I... I just can’t understand how this ends up working out in the end,” Chrome murmured, voice unsteady. “I get the implications but... it’s just…”

He exhaled shakily, rubbing at his temple like it might help the thoughts fall into place. This was supposed to be a *plan.* That was what Gen had said—a setup to draw Tsukasa’s attention to the neck. It had to do with the petrification stone. Gen had laid it out, Senku had *confirmed* it, and Chrome had followed the logic. But still. Senku had died. He’d seen the body—limp, empty, terrifying in its stillness. *Dead.*

Which meant…

Which meant that if they were right, if all of that had been planned—

Then you could die and come back to life if you were petrified and revived.

That idea hit him like a lightning strike. It changed *everything*. Not just for Senku. Not just for Tsukasa. But for their entire understanding of the petrification. For *science*. For *life*. The possibilities spun out in wild directions, each more unbelievable than the last. It was overwhelming. And kind of horrifying.

But also…

Also?

Chrome swallowed hard, heart still racing—and grinned.

It was so *cool*.

Absolutely, mind-blowingly, world-changingly *cool*.

He needed to know how it worked.

Chrome was still caught somewhere between *this is terrifying* and *this is the coolest thing I've ever heard* when he felt Senku's eyes on him.

He looked up—and there it was.

That grin. Wild, sharp, and full of something only other scientists could really understand. Not just pride. Not just thrill. It was that *electric* buzz of discovery, of two people arriving at the same unbelievable conclusion from totally different directions.

"Figured caught up, Chrome?" Senku asked, his voice low and energized, grin practically dangerous. "As expected from a scientist."

The words hit harder than Chrome expected. His heart stuttered—just once—before racing again. He wasn't sure if he could really claim the title like that, not yet. Not when he'd been shaking minutes ago, not when his hands were still damp from how hard that scene had hit. But Senku *meant* it. That was enough to make the buzz in his chest explode outward.

"I—yeah," he said, blinking hard, the pieces still slotting into place behind his eyes. "I think I *do* get it."

Senku leaned forward slightly, eyes gleaming with that manic light that always meant something dangerous and incredible was coming next.

“I ten billion percent get what you're feeling right now. We are going to figure this thing out and know everything we can about it,” Senku said.

And somehow, that made everything okay again.

Chrome grinned back—unsteady but real.

At Senku's side, Gen raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Chrome was tempted to stick his tongue out at him, but somehow refrained.

"I know you wouldn't leave a job like rebuilding civilization half done, you have to be okay. I just know it!"

It seemed like they had gotten far enough away. Taiju lowered Senku gently to the ground, but his body slumped at an odd angle—twisted, limp. Taiju quickly shifted him into something flatter, straighter. Less wrong. Then, with trembling hands, he started trying to give him chest compressions. Yuzuriha swallowed, hard. She reached out with two shaking fingers and pressed them to the side of Senku’s neck. Nothing. Tears finally spilled over—no longer held back by the run or the urgency. There was nothing stopping them now.

No pulse.

No heartbeat.

No… Senku?

No, that couldn’t be. That couldn’t be. She and Taiju knew him better than anyone. He wouldn’t just—he couldn’t. Taiju had said it before: there had to be something they were missing.

"I'm trying," Taiju said hoarsely, pressing down on Senku’s chest again, voice cracking in a way she’d never heard from him—not even once. “I don’t know if I’m doing it right, but I can’t just do nothing. This is all I can think of.”

His neck. Senku had been struck there—hard. They'd moved him. Carried him. Let him bounce in their arms like luggage as they ran.

Was it possible…?

Was it possible he'd still been alive? That in trying to save him—

Her throat seized up. She couldn't even think it. Couldn't form the words. If they'd made it worse—*if they'd*—

Taiju swallowed hard. Francois's words from earlier came rushing back like a punch to the gut. If Senku had still been alive after that first blow—if there had been even the faintest chance—and *he* had carried him like that, jostled him, let him flop around while they ran…

Then maybe…

Maybe he'd been the one to finish the job.

The thought made him nauseous.

He stared at the screen, jaw clenched, stomach turning.

"I would've been ten billion percent *deader* if you *didn't* pick me up, in whatever idiotic scenario you're cooking up in that empty skull of yours," Senku muttered, his voice dry. He was casually picking at his ear with one hand—the other still loosely held in Gen's grasp.

Taiju blinked.

And then, despite everything—he smiled.

Just a little. But it shifted everything.

“Oh,” Taiju said brightly, as if the weight of the moment had just cracked like an eggshell, “Are you and Gen together now?”

Senku’s eye *twitched,* “How the hell does your thought process even *work*, you big oaf?! Focus on the screen! We can talk about *that* later!”

Gen, to his credit, looked *extremely* pleased with himself.

“Aww~ don’t be shy, Senku-chan,” He purred, lacing his fingers more snugly into Senku’s in full view of everyone, clearly enjoying the chaos he’d just stirred.

Senku rolled his eyes. For a moment, it looked like he might let it drop—until he tilted his head slightly, thought for a beat… and then leaned in *very* close. Whatever he whispered was too quiet for anyone else to hear. But Gen’s reaction was immediate. His face went bright red. *Scarlet*. He pulled his hand back like it had burned him, blinking rapidly and clearly flustered. Senku leaned back with the smuggest, *most victorious* grin anyone had ever seen on him.

It was ridiculous. So *Senku*. Taiju couldn’t help it—he smiled. Relief cracked through his chest. That expression, that smug little look—*that* was his friend, his brother? Alive and scheming and being kind of a jerk about it.

"Seriously..." Ukyo muttered nearby, one eyebrow raised as he stared at the pair. “Now is *so* not the time. We are literally watching your dead body on screen—”

He sighed, cutting himself off, rubbing the side of his head like this was giving him a headache.

“You know what? I’m not even gonna question it anymore.”

Taiju let out a laugh—small, choked, but real. Yuzuriha squeezed his arm, and even though her eyes were still a little red, she was smiling too.

"He… he gave himself up for me," She said, barely audible. "And got hit at the neck. His neck, Taiju. I— I don't know— I don't know!"

The tears came hard this time, her whole body shuddering with them.

Taiju froze for a beat. Then: "Wait. You're saying he sacrificed himself?"

His voice was soft. Almost thoughtful. And in another context, that might have sounded noble. Like Senku, in all his logic, had calculated the odds and made a choice. But this wasn't noble. Not when his body was cooling by the minute—not when her hands were still on his skin and she couldn't tell if it was the cold rain or the life fading out of him.

"No," Taiju said, more firmly now. "No. Senku wouldn't go the suicide route. Remember? That one time, when we were kids—he said it. He'd always risk the whole game if it meant a chance to save everyone. That's his flaw. That's why we have to figure this out." He looked up at her, desperate. "He was always the best option guy. If there was any chance, he'd take it. We just need to figure out what he was thinking."

Gen's face was *still* a little red, no matter how hard he tried to will it away. Senku, the absolute menace, was still looking smug beside him, far too pleased with himself for delivering the whispered message that had scrambled Gen's brain. For a terrifying moment, Gen actually considered the possibility that he could *lose* their little bet—if Senku kept pulling moves like *that.*

But no.

He was a Mentalist. He didn't *lose* games like this.

Especially not to his emotionally avoidant mad scientist of a maybe-boyfriend. A... Mutual pinner? What where they? Did it it matter?

Focus.

Better to look at what was *in front* of him than beside him.

Taiju's voice had taken on that deep, desperate certainty—the kind Gen knew well. The kind that came when you were clinging to hope like a lifeline. *Senku wouldn't go the suicide route*, he'd said.

And Gen... believed him. Not only because they already KNEW that Senku did, but also because that is just exactly how Senku was as a person.

Because of course Senku wouldn't. The man was obnoxiously stubborn about always finding a third option, even when none existed. That was the kind of thinking that got them *here*. Risking everything for some impossibly narrow win condition was basically Senku's entire personality.

Gen frowned, something itching at the back of his mind.

That phrasing… *Senku wouldn't go the suicide route*—that was familiar. It sounded like someone wrote out some form of the trolley problem for Senku to solve. Of course Senku would be the type to ignore the different options and make his own path. It was almost comical how on-brand that was. Senku never accepted boxed-in logic. If the problem didn't make sense, he'd rewrite it. Lay out all the variables. Find the flaw. Build a new path. Save everyone. It did kind of suck the fun out of the hypothetical though. Gen had pity for whoever wrote THAT one, going through the effort of thinking about such a scenario only to have it shot down probably hurt. Though if Senku had shot it down, it was probably a bad scenario anyway.

> Senku nearly rolled his eyes. Out of all the possible excerpts from Doctor Asagiri, the club idiots always managed to drag in the worst ones. Pop psychology fluff disguised as intellectual debate. He could practically smell the recycled ink from whatever cheap magazine reprinted it last. At least they'd waited until Taiju and Yuzuriha showed up to bring it up. Probably sensed that Senku was ten billion percent uninterested and even less likely to pretend otherwise.

"You're kidding. It's *seriously* going to show *this*?" Senku muttered, nose wrinkling as he gestured toward the screen. "What purpose does this even serve?"

His leg bounced irritably. Of all the moments to drag out of the archives, *this* had to be the one. He could remember every detail of that day—the smell of solder, the flick of wires under his fingers, the spinning of flasks, and those annoying filler-club recruits bringing in *pop psychology trash* instead of anything useful. Worse, *Asagiri-brand trash*. He remembered how own string of rather embarrassing thoughts on the matter.

And now the screen was airing it for everyone. Specifically, the Mentalist. He sighed. *Ten billion percent* this would come back to bite him. He could already feel Gen's teasing loading up behind those stupidly expressive eyes—

Except...

Gen wasn’t smug. Or flirty. Or pleased.

He actually looked... *dejected*?

Senku blinked and turned toward him, eyebrow raised. “Mentalist?”

Gen waved him off without his usual flair. “Don’t worry about it, Senku-chan. Just... dwelling on my own unfortunate thoughts. I seem to have been unintentionally cruel. I owe someone an apology.”

“Oh wow! Is that what Gen used to look like before?!” Chrome cut in from the other side of the room, squinting at the flashback footage. Then, after a beat, he added helpfully, “...Your hair looks *way* better now.”

Gen slumped further in his seat, one hand dragging down his face. Did he not agree? Senku kind of agreed. It was more unique, fit his personality better this way.

“Thank you, Chrome, dear,” Gen said, voice flat. “I appreciate it.”

Still—he had missed them today. It was good to see them, if only for a bit of mental stimulation that didn't come in the form of willful stupidity.

"Check out this psychology quiz," One of the stooges said, practically vibrating with secondhand excitement. "There's been a tragic accident. Between your friend, your lover, and yourself—only one of you can be saved. Who do you choose?"

Of course, he aimed the question at Yuzuriha. Typical.

"What do you mean by that?" Kohaku asked, brows furrowing in honest confusion.

Senku shrugged, flicking a hand vaguely at the screen. "These kinds of questions—choosing between yourself, a friend, or a lover—they're usually aimed at women, not guys."

He didn't really have the words for *why*. That wasn't his area. So, with a small sideways glance, he turned the spotlight where it belonged.

"Oi, Mentalist. You wanna explain?"

Gen, still slouched but a little more composed now, perked up at the invitation. He folded his hands primly in his lap, shifting smoothly into lecture mode like it was second nature, "Ah, yes. These kinds of moral dilemma questions are often targeted at women because—psychologically speaking—they've been culturally socialized to value *emotional labor.* This focus on the emotional for females is something that is present in a lot of different writings and works. The test is less about your values and more about how much guilt or sacrifice you're willing to shoulder. It's a subtle way of reinforcing the idea that a woman's identity should revolve around others."

Senku swallowed and could feel his cheeks flush a little - Better to not invite this type of lecture if he didn't want to lose their little game.

Kohaku's eyes narrowed slightly, not angry—just thinking.

Gen continued, fingers steepled. “Whereas men, in many of these hypothetical scenarios, are assumed to make choices based on logic or utilitarian reasoning. Which is, of course, nonsense—people of *any* gender can be selfish, empathetic, clever, or reckless. But the bias is baked into how the questions are framed.”

“Huh.” Chrome looked thoughtful, scratching at his chin. “So it’s like… the question’s already rigged before you even answer it?”

“Exactly!” Gen snapped, delighted. “It’s a psychological trap disguised as a moral test. And *that’s* why I can predict that your local scientist here refused to pick any of the options.”

Senku smirked faintly. “Ten billion percent not worth engaging if the premise is flawed.”

Gen gave a low laugh, “*I* was the one publishing those garbage questions under a pseudonym in high school. So… I guess this is my karmic retribution. Senku-chan making fun of my questions because I decided to purposely angle it toward a female audience in order to get money. What goes around comes around."

> She blinked, caught off guard. “Ehhh… I think I’d get a little stuck choosing between my friend and my lover.”
>
> Senku grimaced. Not at her—just at the implications. If he was the friend and Taiju the lover, that was a nauseatingly sentimental corner to be painted into. Fortunately, he had no intention of ever letting any of them wind up in a situation that illogically restrictive in the first place.
>
> “There’s always another option,” He muttered to himself, watching the bubbles rise in his beaker.
>
> “Might pick yourself in the heat of the moment,” Stooge #1 added thoughtfully, still clearly unaware that Yuzuriha had more spine in her pinky than he did in his entire body.

Yuzuriha blinked in surprise at the words playing across the screen—and then she smiled softly. “Thank you, Senku,” she said, even though he wasn’t the one on-screen anymore.

She'd known, of course. You couldn't be friends with Senku and not understand, on some level, how highly he thought of them—how he relied on them. But seeing it *spoken*, (for lack of a better term) and laid bare in a moment like this, gave it a different kind of weight. No calculations, no sarcasm, no clever deflection—just Senku, straightforward to a fault, refusing to accept a scenario where any of them had to be sacrificed.

That was how he showed he cared.

Well... that and putting his entire life in danger for their sake. But still.

She reached out and gently ruffled Taiju's hair. He immediately leaned into it with a grin, and her heart lifted even higher.

If nothing else, this whole mess had brought them here—to now. To *him*. And that alone was worth every ounce of the emotional whiplash they'd all been through.

> "How could anyone make that choice?!" Taiju suddenly burst out, looking horrified. "That quiz of yours is kinda nasty!"
>
> Senku hid a smirk. Big oaf was easy to rile. Predictably righteous. It was an absurd scenario, anyway. Oversimplified for maximum drama. It didn't account for factors like time, method of rescue, physics, probability curves—real variables. He poured another solution into his flask and let it sizzle as he spoke without looking up. "I'd choose everyone. I'd look for a fundamental flaw in the problem. Something overlooked. There's always a flaw. And I'd use that to save all of us."
>
> "Aww, that's the kind of answer you'd expect from the science club president," Yuzuriha said, her voice soft with amusement.

"Ha! For some reason, I find it hard to imagine Senku being a club president in school," Ryusui huffed out, arms crossed, the corners of his mouth twitching upward.

Senku didn't even hesitate. "Probably because *you* were private schooled, rich boy. I had to scrounge up random warm bodies to join just so I could get access to the lab for free. Public school hustle. Ten billion percent strategic."

He wore the grin of a man deeply proud of his grift. Gen, predictably, was looking at him like he'd just proposed on one knee with a microscope. That soft, starry-eyed expression was almost embarrassing. Almost. But Ryusui couldn't judge—because *he* wanted Senku for the same reason. Scheming intelligence was hot. Both on Senku, and on Gen. He wanted both of them.

Across the room, Chrome blinked at the screen and tilted his head. "Wait… is Taiju kinda insulting *Gen's* book here?"

Gen groaned and slumped over theatrically in his seat. "He is, Chrome-kun. *He is.* And I deserve it. I'll admit. If I had known that I had such harsh critics I would have at least made the scenario have a little more substance."

Yuzuriha stifled a laugh behind her hand, patting Gen's back consolingly, while Taiju—blissfully unaware—looked confused, "Oh no! Did I say something bad?! I didn't mean to!"

"No, no, big oaf," Senku drawled, smirking. "You just called Gen's publishing career 'nasty' is all."

Gen looked skyward. "Karma is real."

"Don't worry," Ryusui added brightly and wondered what type of reaction he could get out of Senku, "I've insulted Gen far more directly and he still flirts with *me*."

All he got was an unimpressed raised eyebrow. Not just from Senku, but from Ukyo as well, who clearly understood what he was attempting to do.

Senku nearly rolled his eyes again—but didn't. It wasn't a bad kind of fondness.

"In that case, I pick that too!" Taiju declared, pounding a fist into his palm. "That's the best answer!"

Stooge #1, not knowing when to quit, chimed in again: “I think the point of the question is to reveal what’s most important to you.”

Senku paused, looked up, and stared at him flatly. “That’s ten billion percent obvious. Your quiz belongs in the trash.”

He went back to adjusting his solution. Maybe he should make it a rule: if you wanted to join the science club, you had to read the real Asagiri. The essays. The dissertation. Not the pop psych trash they printed in books with covers that looked like they belonged in a discount manga rack. Honestly, it was embarrassing.

Playback resumes in 15 minutes.

Gen was *thrilled*.

Senku refused to look at him. *Absolutely refused.* It was clear in every stubborn line of his body—even as his fingers twitched faintly in Gen’s peripheral vision. Adorable. Predictable. And very, *very* fun.

“I think it’s sweet that you liked Gen so much before you even met him,” Yuzuriha said brightly, clasping her hands.

Senku shot her the driest look known to man. Her smile only widened.

Still refusing to look, Gen noted with satisfaction. But the silence was cracking—he could feel it.

And then… he turned.

Senku *looked* at him. Really looked. Gen gave him his most innocent, wide-eyed expression—which meant the exact opposite of innocence—and, sure enough, Senku’s eyes narrowed. Probably clocked the slight twitch of Gen’s lips struggling not to twist into something far more smug.

“I think I’d rather go back to looking at my dead body,” Senku said flatly.

“Ohoho~ of course, Senku-chan,” Gen purred, shifting just a little closer, “It’s just a break, after all. So, do you perhaps want to—”

“1, 2, 3, 4, 5...” Senku began muttering, eyes pointedly averted.

“Senku-chan~?”

“13, 14, 15…”

"Sennnkuuuuu deeeaaaaarrrrrrr~"

Yuzuriha was laughing softly behind her hand. Chrome looked incredibly confused but delighted. Ryusui was grinning like it was a live show worth paying for. Ukyo had long since sighed and settled back with his tea, which frankly was probably cold by now.

Francois, ever composed, murmured, “It’s quite remarkable how consistent you all are.”

“I find it *endearing,*” Gen said sweetly, eyes never leaving his target.

Senku didn’t respond. Just kept counting.

Only 14 minutes and 25 seconds left.

Chapter End Notes

"There was a pause.
“…No,” Senku said at last."
Good boy Gen thought to himself.

That is how that particular scene almost went, though I felt like it might have been a bit much for our hearts.

Also I'm sorry for being a little late! This chapter took more time than I had expected.

Chapter 21: Episode 5 Part 3

Chapter by orphan_account

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“861… 862… 863…”

No matter what happened next, it had to be better than dealing with the way Gen was looking at him right now—lighthearted, all teasing eyes and sing-song charm. Which, Senku had to admit, was a good look on him. Not quite as good as those cutting stares or the ‘Dr. Asagiri’ expression he used when talking about psychological warfare—but still good.

Too good.

A flush crept up his neck before he could stop it, unhelpfully timed with the memory of Gen sitting in front of him, dissecting his brain like it was a frog pinned to a lab tray—talking in circles, peeling Senku’s thoughts apart with clinical precision and a goddamn smile.

“Senku-chan~ You must be thinking of something *interesting*~*!*”

Gen’s voice chirped way too close to his ear.

Senku twitched, head jerking up. When had he looked down? Gen was leaning in, way too smug.

Again—great look on him. Infuriating.

“Mentalist,” Senku grumbled, trying to lean back and put *any* distance between them.

Which, of course, only made Gen pout. Senku stared at him, equal parts annoyed and doomed. *Why did I have to fall for this troublesome guy?* The admission made his chest flutter in a way that had no place in a scientific environment, and the flush returned, stronger now.

Saved by the bell, the screen flickered back to life.

> “Yeah… you’re right. He wouldn’t do that…” Yuzuriha tried to think—tried to push past the fog and panic weighing down her mind. Images of Senku flickered through her thoughts, scrambled and fast—Senku focused, Senku laughing, Senku rubbing at his neck—rubbing his neck. Or…
>
> “His… neck,” she whispered.
>
> “His neck?” Taiju echoed, eyes narrowing with sudden focus.
>
> Her thoughts started to accelerate, grasping at the memory, trying to shove everything else—grief, panic, the sight of Senku’s still body—out of the way. “Back at the hot spring, when I was caught… Senku, he looked like he was drawing attention to his neck. Maybe… that was where he *wanted* Tsukasa to hit him. He didn’t use to do that, right?”
>
> She turned toward Taiju, desperate for confirmation.
>
> “You’re right!” he said, eyes wide. “Maybe he was trying to tell us something!”

"You're lucky they know you so well," Ukyo noted, voice low but with that gravelly note of impressed honesty.

Senku huffed a laugh. "Luck had nothing to do with it. I knew ten billion percent these guys would figure it out without me needing to hold their hands. I've known them a long time. They never disappoint."

“Senkkkkuuuuuuu—!”

That was the only warning he got before something—well, someone, and by someone he did mean his well-meaning best friend—slammed into his side, smashing him into Gen in the process. *Huh,* Senku thought, vaguely, *he’s kinda skinny.* Maybe he could ask what Gen’s favorite food was sometime. Recreate it. Add a little more protein. Before he could finish that

half-baked thought, he was *yanked* off Gen and pulled into Taiju's arms with all the subtlety of a freight train.

Senku squirmed—sort of. It was a weak effort, at best. He could hear Gen snickering behind him, which gave away just how *not secret* his reluctance really was.

"Jesus, you oaf—would you *please* calm down!" He hissed out, exasperated.

They'd literally hugged, like, a day ago. Just how *needy* was this guy?! Yuzuriha was supposed to mellow him out. Clearly, trying to push those two together had produced *zero utility* in terms of cling-reduction.

Taiju only squeezed him tighter.

This was getting ridiculous.

He tried to elbow Taiju in the ribs, but it was like trying to shove a concrete pillar. "Yuzurihaaa," he groaned, dragging the name out like a complaint, "Can you *please* come peel your emotionally explosive boyfriend off of me before I suffocate?"

No answer.

Senku blinked, annoyed, and turned toward her— And froze.

Yuzuriha wasn't looking at them. She was staring at the screen. Her hands were covering her mouth, trembling slightly. Tears welled in her eyes—already spilling down her cheeks. She wasn't blinking. Just watching. Senku followed her gaze— And there he still was.

Dead.

Oh. Right. It was still showign that on the TV.

Taiju's arms didn't loosen. If anything, they squeezed tighter—but it felt different now. Less excitement, more desperation. Like maybe he wasn't just hugging Senku because he missed him—but because, for a second, he thought he'd never get to again. Senku opened his mouth. Then shut it. There wasn't anything useful to say. His brain kicked into overdrive. Say something? No—what the hell *could* he say?

"Don't cry, it's fine, I only died a little?" "Good thing I had a contingency plan for postmortem resurrection?"

No. That would just make it worse. Ten billion percent worse.

Taiju was still clinging to him like some massive grief-stricken koala. Senku's arms were pinned. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe.

His eyes darted—fast, instinctive—to the one person who might *get it.*

Gen.

And there he was. Watching. Expression unreadable, smile gone, head slightly tilted like he was already three steps ahead in a conversation Senku hadn't started yet. Senku didn't say anything it was in his eyes: *Do something. Please.*

His brain was short-circuiting.

Gen moved immediately. No fanfare, no smug quips—just a smooth pivot and a quiet clearing of his throat as he stepped toward Yuzuriha. His tone dropped to something soft and even, just loud enough to cut through the static of the moment.

"Yuzuriha-chan," Gen said gently. "Look at him. Not the screen."

Gen crouched down next to her, hands loose at his sides, voice still calm.

“He’s here. Right in front of you. Breathing. Fully upright. Still complaining.”

Senku might’ve said *I’m not complaining,* if he had access to his lungs. The Mentalist's comments—somehow—earned the tiniest breath of a laugh. Barely there. But real. Yuzuriha’s shoulders loosened just a little, and her hands moved away from her mouth. Senku didn’t say anything. Couldn’t, literally. Still far too crushed and uncomfortable. Gen reached out and wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of one knuckle, like it was nothing, like he did this every day.

“You already cried over him once, back when we found his body. I don’t think he wants a repeat performance.”

And then, like he hadn’t just single-handedly de-escalated the entire situation, Gen turned smoothly toward Taiju without missing a beat.

“If you crush his ribs again,” He said dryly, “Then there was no point in reviving him, right?”

Taiju made a panicked sound and finally loosened his grip.

Senku exhaled for what felt like the first time in minutes.

It was a start. A small one, but something they could grab onto. And then Taiju moved again, lifting Senku slightly—limp, so painfully limp—and Yuzuriha forced herself to look. *Really* look. Not at his face. Not at his hands. At his neck.

There. A fragment of stone. A patch of petrification that hadn’t been broken.

“Does this mean… if we use the fluid on him, it could…?” Her voice trailed off, hope trembling beneath the words.

Taiju gave a sharp nod. “When we fixed your foot, Senku said depetrification fills in cracks. If he planned this, then—then yeah. It could work.”

She was already digging through the bag, pulling out their last precious vial of revival fluid. “Here, Taiju! The revival fluid!”

Without hesitation, Taiju poured it over the remnant of stone at Senku’s neck.

“At least it’s a chance!” he said—but Yuzuriha could already feel something shift. Elation, bright and rising. Senku had led them here. He *had* to know it would work. If there was anything she believed in without question, it was Senku’s science.

She looked ready to cry again.

Senku had to admit—he was touched by the thought process. Maybe even a little impressed by how deeply she'd traced his logic, followed it through grief and desperation to find the one thing that mattered. But still… the tears. Again? It was more than a little unnerving how often people seemed to cry over him lately. Yuzuriha wasn’t Taiju—she wouldn’t throw herself at him uninvited, wouldn’t cling or sob into his shoulder—but she looked just about ready to burst again. Which meant she probably *needed* it, even if she wouldn’t ask for it. Unlike her limpet boyfriend.

Senku sighed.

They were almost through this part. It would be fine.

In the meantime—

“Oaf,” Senku muttered, jerking his head toward her without looking, “Your better half could use some comfort.”

Taiju didn’t hesitate. He gave Senku one last rib-crushing squeeze before peeling away, moving to Yuzuriha in an instant. She didn’t say anything—just let herself be pulled into his arms, her face immediately crumpling. Taiju pressed a kiss to her forehead, whispering something too soft for Senku to hear.

Senku rolled his eyes faintly, but the corners of his mouth tugged upward anyway.

"Smooth," Gen teased.

"Shut up."

Please… please work.

Her fists clenched. Her eyes squeezed shut—

—and then *snap*.

The sound of cracking stone hit the air. Her eyes flew open as flakes of petrification began to fall from Senku's neck and scatter across the ground.

"WAKE UP, SENKUUUUUU!" Taiju screamed, his voice cracking with desperation. Yuzuriha couldn't believe how dead his eyes looked, they never were when Taiju was acting loud in any sort of way, so it was... They almost looked so dull, nothing like their usual deep red, "I KNOW YOU'LL LIVE! I KNOW YOU WON'T DIE IN A PLACE LIKE THIS! YOU'RE HUMANITY'S HOPE! THIS HAS TO WORK—SENKUUUUU!!"

Senku stuck a finger in his ear, pretending he wasn't feeling anything at all. It probably worked on everyone except the people who knew him best. "I thought I'd proven some crazy scientific theory about petrification, but apparently all it takes to wake the dead is a big enough scream from the big oaf."

"Haha! Imagine what you can do with lungs like that!" Ryusui laughed, far too enthusiastically.

"Ryusui-sama..." Francois muttered low, their voice dry, but the small disappointment in their boss was easily noted.

Gen wasn't entirely sure what direction that comment was going in—and frankly, knowing Ryusui, it could've been several. He wouldn't even put it past the captain to say it vaguely on purpose just to see what stuck. Either way, it earned him a look of faint amusement from Senku—who, despite everything, always had a certain appreciation for Ryusui's brand of chaos.

What really caught Gen's attention, though, was Ukyo.

Was that… a laugh? Or close enough to one to be suspicious? Just a breath, a shift in posture, but enough to catch Gen's well-trained eye. Interesting. Very interesting. Ryusui, for all his smirking bravado, hadn't even noticed—but Gen definitely had. That was the kind of thing a mentalist lived for. And if Ukyo thought he could get away with teasing Gen and Senku earlier without getting it returned in kind, he was sorely mistaken.

Not that Gen planned to jump on it right away. No, no—he was a professional. Plus, it wasn't as if Ukyo was deeply into the attraction, no, he was just about as attracted to Ryusui as Gen was, which was to say, surface level at best. These things were best drawn out with just the right amount slow burn anyway. Besides, he had other priorities. The food issue Suika reported. The quiet guilt still lingering in Senku's posture. The fact that, after hours, Senku rarly let go of his hand. And of course, most importantly, his plan to win their ridiculous little kissing game.

Although, to be fair… it wasn't exactly looking like such a ridiculous idea anymore. They had both fallen into the competitive spirit pretty easily.

He found his thoughts drifting—taunting Ukyo, psych evaluations with Taiju, the next time Senku would see him *in action.* The way Senku had looked earlier when he got all hot and bothered by Gen's cruelty fantasy toward Tsukasa? That was definitely worth recreating.

Honestly, he would've been actively scheming if it weren't for the image on the screen. Dead eyes. Still body. It kept dragging him back.

A soft brush on his cheek pulled him from that spiral. He turned his head slightly. Senku was looking at him, face stiff, concern flickering beneath the surface. The moment their eyes met, Senku dug a little harder at his ear in a clear nervous tic, a faint blush creeping across his face from the right ear down.

“You okay, Mentalist?” he asked quietly.

Gen relaxed almost instantly. Hah. Damn him. *I am now,* he thought, letting himself breathe again.

He didn’t mean to be too sentimental, so instead, he smiled wide and let the chaos take over.

“Sure~! Just thinking about Cupid’s bows and arrows of love!”

As expected, Ukyo immediately turned to look at him, sharp-eyed and suspicious. He didn’t understand the comment—but he definitely knew it was about him. Fair, because the comment was actually bullshit and didn't have any meaning other than to confuse the archer. Gen gave him his most innocent smile.

Let the games begin.

> "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. All right I can make it passed 800,000 seconds without all but losing consciousness now. I guess my brain is finally adjusting. I've been frozen for 117,354,889,550 seconds. So that makes this the 3718 spring since I froze, and starting in spring is an absolute must if I want to survive. Okay, no time like the present. Come on me, get up. Get up... GET UP DAMMIT! Get up!"
>
> "Get up..."
>
> "Get. UP!"
>
> A beat. Then light.

Ukyo moved his narrow gaze from Gen (and whatever mess that man was clearly planning) and back toward the reaction screen, only to be met with another flashback it seemed like. One form Senku's point of view, thankfully. (He wasn't dreading it behind his tern, he wasn't, there was also the chance that it would simply never come, compared to some of the others he was hardly all that interesting, after all)

Wishful thinking. He knew better.

“If this were an actual television show,” Ukyo murmured, “The number of flashbacks would be unbearable.”

Ryusui barked out a laugh beside him, far too entertained.

Francois, as ever, intervened with crisp composure. “ I am quite certain that Master Senku would have arranged these memories in the most cohesive way possible. It is likely this structure best serves the narrative.”

Ukyo almost smiled.

Francois wasn’t wrong. But they also weren’t entirely right.

He wasn’t Gen— not even close. But Ukyo had seen enough to know that Senku, despite all his strategic brilliance and scientific focus, was not above a little mischief. The man could be ruthlessly serious when it counted, sure, but the odds that he’d tailored this playback to mess with them? Extremely high. Especially with how often it looped around and away from emotionally compromising moments. It was just… very *Senku.*

From somewhere beside him, Gen’s voice dropped low, soft enough that no one else would’ve caught it: “You sounded so desperate, Senku- chan…”

Ukyo’s ear twitched. His eyes shifted automatically. Senku’s red gaze was already on him.

He winced. Just slightly.

They'd been more tolerant than most about the invasions of privacy. Ukyo didn't take it for granted. Still, he could remember the way the Kingdom of Might had once bristled at his presence. Most of that tension had faded since the merger— but some of the memories lingered.

Senku's eyes moved away from him.

To Gen.

"Didn't we already talk about this in our little interview?" Senku asked, dryly.

Gen tilted his head, smiling that maddening smile of his. "Wanna have a sequel~?"

Judging solely by Senku's heartrate, Ukyo could confirm: the answer was a resounding yes. They weren't even together yet apparently, and it already sounded like they had their *kinks* sorted out.

> Blinding and green, cutting through the void. Senku's breath hitched. He let out a short laugh—choked, almost breathless with the overwhelming wave of relief. He was here. It hadn't been for nothing. He had made it.

"Baaaaaad!" Chrome exclaimed, eyes shining. "Do you think we'll get to see everyone waking up from petrification?"

He turned to the others, but they looked… uncomfortable. Chrome blinked, confused. Most of the people who'd been revived from stone had this weird hang- up about privacy. It wasn't like that in the village. There weren't many secrets when you all lived in the same place, drank the same water, and shared walls thinner than paper.

He glanced at Kohaku. She looked perplexed too.

It wasn’t like they *minded* , exactly. Sure, it kind of sucked to have your thoughts aired out like laundry, but the modern folk? They acted like it was a whole different level of violation.

Senku, on the other hand, nodded immediately. “I’m almost ten billion percent sure it’ll show everyone getting depetrified eventually— and their thoughts while it happened. We talked about it before— the process, the feeling of waking up. It’ll be valuable data. Get excited, Chrome.”

Right. Because this was big. Because they still didn’t fully understand petrification.

Because it could bring people back from the dead.

That was terrifying. And thrilling. And completely badass.

Chrome couldn’t help it— his grin stretched wide again.

> "One, two, three, four…" The count continued somewhere in the back of his mind, not out of necessity, but out of habit. Knowing the date might prove useful. The moss and dirt clinging to his lower half suggested he’d been partially buried—but not too deeply. Luck was on his side.

“Heh… Was that the last of your luck at work, Senku-chan~?” Gen asked dryly.

Were they even fooling themselves at this point?

Kohaku sighed, relieved that the image of Senku’s lifeless body was finally gone from the screen— but less thrilled that it had been replaced with the even more frustrating sight of *these two* . Watching Senku and Gen dance around their feelings was getting ridiculous. It was obvious. Painfully obvious. To everyone. They weren’t holding hands right now, sure— but the way they leaned toward each other said enough. Senku shifted his ankle, bumping it lightly against Gen’s leg like a magnet drawn to its pair.

Sickening. Cute.

Honestly, they might even be *cuter* than Taiju and Yuzuriha in a weird way. And *that* was saying something.

> His body felt… incredible. No pain. No stiffness. His lungs drew in air so easily it startled him. Could the process of petrification have somehow repaired damage? He filed the observation away for later.
>
> First objective: assess the surroundings. Starting with himself. Senku sat up, letting the remaining stone flake off his body. Each detail mattered—the way the fragments fell, the orientation of his limbs, the feel of the ground beneath him. Clues, every one of them.
>
> Rustling.
>
> His gaze snapped toward the source.
>
> Monkeys. A small troop watching from the trees. Their expressions were oddly judgmental.
>
> He imagined their inner dialogue. "Yo! Where are you from? What tribe are you in?" Another screeched in horror. "OH GOD, HE'S SHINY! WHAT KIND OF MONKEY HAS SKIN LIKE THAT?!"
>
> One made a dramatic sound. "HE'S GOT HIS NASTY PEEPEE OUT TOO!"
>
> "WELL, ALL OF US DO, BUT STILL!"

Well. That was a step beyond simply talking to yourself. Still, it wasn't entirely surprising. Senku had spent thousands of years in the prison of his own mind— of course he'd started giving monkeys dialogue. Probably not far off from the kinds of internal conversations he'd been having to stay sane. Gen found himself wanting to ask about it. To pry. It would get him those delightful, reactive expressions— the kind that gave him a real edge in their little game. The screen was safe now too— no dead eyes, no silent grief. Perfect time to strike.

… But maybe not in public.

Senku didn’t seem to mind affection in front of others— he’d been surprisingly open about it so far— but teasing him into a fluster felt like a different beast entirely. More intimate somehow. And as tempting as it was, Gen didn’t want to push it too far too fast.

Also, objectively…

Ryusui was gasping for air beside him, practically wheezing from laughter. Senku voicing monkey dialogue with that screaming delivery? Yeah, it was comedy gold. Rare too— Senku only used that voice when talking to Taiju, usually. Gen could hardly blame Ryusui for losing it.

And yet…

Whoever was behind the camera work clearly had a sense of aesthetic, because the close-up on Senku—lean, strong, all post-depetrification glow-up—was practically illegal. Gen swallowed, shallow and instinctive. The scientist in front of him looked *very* much like the one on-screen. And he was close. Too close. There was no way Senku had read him that easily. Right?

… Right?

Senku wasn’t a trained mentalist— his acting sucked, his charisma was aggressively optional — but the bastard was *observant* . Annoyingly so. But Gen wasn’t just *people* . He was *Gen Asagiri* , master manipulator. No way Senku saw through that... Yet... Senku’s hand reached over, two fingers brushing Gen’s wrist— repeating a small, deliberate pattern. Not tapping. Not Morse. More like… writing. Even if Ukyo could hear the friction, translating letter strokes by sound would be absurd.

See something you like, Mentalist?

Gen felt his mask nearly crack. *That*— that had to be a guess. It *had* to be fishing.

But the fish was on the hook, and Gen knew it.

This fishing was something that Senku learned from Gen, and here he was... Just *Senku being smug with his calloused thumb against Gen's pulse point.*

"Hey, Mentalist," Senku muttered, like it wasn't going to ruin Gen's entire evening, "Did you know your heart rate just went up by 6.5 percent?"

Gen sucked in a slow, steadying breath— and forced it back down. Still too late.

Senku added, eyes still on him, "Also, your pupils are dilate—"

"Senku-chan is *nothing but a fraud* for stealing my moves," Gen snapped, cutting him off with a perfectly timed leg cross and exaggerated sigh as he turned back toward the TV. He could *not* look at that face. Not when Senku got *that* victorious gleam in his eyes. Gen was weak to that gleam, and Senku must have *known* it. He'd kiss him. He'd absolutely kiss him. Right here. Right now.

And that would be losing the game.

So no. Mask back on. Focus forward. Look at the monkey skit, not the dangerously attractive scientist beside him.

> Ha... Was he going crazy? Crazy people probably don't ask themselves that, but they also probably don't have whole scenario of a monkey conversation in their heads either. Still, the monkeys' rapid retreat told him something more useful. No contact with humans. Or at least, not recently. That ruled out civilization nearby.

Gen blinked at the screen, lips parting in disbelief. "That," He muttered to himself, "Is the weakest way I've ever heard to measure sanity." He leaned forward a little, elbow propped on his knee, voice low and honey-smooth. "Honestly, the whole *'crazy people don't wonder if they're crazy'* thing was debunked before we even left the womb. Introspection doesn't mean

anything—plenty of high-functioning psychosis cases have insight. Sometimes it makes it worse."

He leaned closer, voice dropping. "Just so you know, Senku-chan, wondering if you've gone mad in the company of monkeys? Still doesn't clear you."

Senku's eyes flicked toward him with that same faint amusement Gen had seen earlier—the smug kind that usually meant he thought he was two steps ahead. Gen didn't give him the satisfaction. He shifted slightly, just enough to nudge Senku's thigh with his own.

"Oh, but do go on," Gen continued, faux-sweet now, "I do adore getting to watch your ever interesting mind do ever interesting things."

Senku's eyebrow twitched. Score.

Gen gave him a brilliant smile, positively glowing with fake concern. "And what was it you asked, again? *'Am I going crazy?'* Darling, if that's your diagnostic threshold, I'd like to welcome you formally to the club." He laced his fingers together with dramatic flair, fluttered his lashes. "We meet Wednesdays. I'll bring the tea."

Senku stared at him for a beat longer, thumb still brushing against Gen's wrist like it wasn't intimately distracting, and then—of course—grinned like he'd just confirmed another one of his pet theories. Gen hated how much he liked that expression, especially since that certainly wasn't the expression that Gen had intended, He'd been hoping for something a little more flustered, but this Senku who was a little more comfortable with touch and flirting was still a little bit of a mystery to Gen.

Still, being stark naked wasn't ideal. Not that there was anyone other than some stray monkeys around to see his dick... For protection, not modesty, he grabbed some vines and fashioned a crude cover around his waist. He didn't need an unfortunate scrape in the wrong place to derail survival on day one.

"Looks like I'm the first shiny monkey born into this world so far," Senku muttered, squinting toward the brush where the monkeys had returned and had been watching him like some rare, malformed animal.

Kohaku raised an unimpressed brow as the screen played on. “Or maybe the rest of us *shiny monkeys* don’t go out of our way to hang out with actual monkeys,” She said dryly, arms crossed as she side-eyed Senku like he’d committed some sort of moral offense against the entire human race.

Senku didn’t miss a beat. “Yeah, yeah, lioness. Or maybe,” He added with a sarcastic lilt, “Your village population was so low the monkeys just never *had* to interact with anyone. They probably didn’t even know humans were still a thing until I showed up—shiny and naked.”

Kohaku wrinkled her nose. “That’s not a mental image I needed repeated.”

Gen chuckled from the side. “Oh, but it’s an image that lives rent-free in all our minds now. Thank you for that, Senku-chan.”

Senku smirked. “You’re welcome.”

Urgh, faint as it was her eyes noticed the blush Senku gained easily enough. Those two were something else.

> It seemed statistically unlikely—but the facts were what they were. No other humans in sight. Just endless green. Stone. Silence. It was fascinating. Electrifying. He could already feel his pulse racing with the possibilities. The data he’d gathered so far was minimal, but promising. He was awake. Whole. Alive. And the world had reverted to a state of total natural reclamation.
>
> It's been 117,354,893,870 seconds now. Heh, that is some nasty mental math, especially when you factor in leap years, not to mention the Earths rotation slows by 17 millionths of a second every year - Though honestly that wouldn't factor for much difference, it was funny to think about. Still that made the date... April 1st, 5738 A.D. he irony wasn’t lost on him. Of course he’d wake up on April Fool’s Day.
>
> He etched it into a tree. He was feeling a little victorious, and he did like marking achievements. He could feel his heart rate speeding up a the excitement from earlier made itself known again.

Even Gen wasn't perfect.

Seeing it again—etched into the tree like a monument—his eyes widened just slightly. He tried to keep the reaction subtle, but it was hard to mask that flicker of awe. Senku's thumb brushed casually over his wrist, right at the pulse point, and Gen exhaled slowly, doing his best to calm his heart rate. It didn't work. Of course it didn't. Senku was too damn good at picking up details, and Gen could already see the gears turning behind that knowing smirk. He could practically feel the moment Senku filed it away for later.

The etching itself wasn't dramatic—just a carved date in a tree—but the image had weight. Finality. Pride. It was something that Gen had imaged a few times, what had Senku looked like when he made the carving - Somehow... This passed any expectations.

He looked so... excited. Alive. Focused in that way Gen knew all too well, and it hit him harder than it should've.

Senku Ishigami: Still illegally attractive, even after 3,700 years.

"Baaaaad! It's literally watching history happen! Must be so cool for you modern people!"

Ukyo shot Gen a knowing look. Of course he heard the spike in Gen's heartbeat. Super-hearing was a curse when you were trying to act composed.

"Yeah, I guess it is pretty cool for us modern folks," Ukyo said with a hint of mischief, eyes flicking pointedly toward Gen. "Some more than others."

Gen gave a dramatic little pout in response, exaggerating the expression until it read more performative than sincere. Distraction. He needed it.

Ryusui, naturally, wasn’t far behind. His eyes jumped from Ukyo to Gen and back again before lighting up with recognition. “Oh, I get it now! Because Gen—”

Ukyo slapped a hand over his mouth before he could finish the sentence. Ryusui let out a muffled, disappointed noise.

Gen gave Ukyo a quick, thankful nod. He owed him one.

Senku teasing him at all was hard enough.

Fuck, was he easy? He didn't remember being this easy.

First things first.

When it came to survival you needed three things, food, water, shelter. Breaking that down even farther, shelter included being warm and dry, which meant the recreation of a man made fire. Fire also meant being able to boil water, which he would rather do before consuming it, although more than likely after over 3700 years most of the pollution has left, there could still be plenty of nasty little bacteria in the water that posed a danger. The simplest and proven way to start a fire? Friction.

He could do the math, but what would be the point.

He found a dry log, a sturdy stick, and some leaf tinder. The friction method wasn’t elegant, but it worked. Or, rather—it usually worked. He rolled the stick between his palms, fast and hard. His hands were already raw. Sweat rolled down his neck.

The monkeys were still watching. Senku could imagine that they were probably thinking he was looking pretty dumb right now.

“Why did you have no fear of them?” Francois asked, their hands folded neatly in their lap. Senku couldn’t help but wonder what it looked like when *they* finally lost their professionalism. Startling Francois might be a rare achievement—and probably a hilarious one. He shook the stray thought from his mind.

“Typically, monkeys—especially this type—don’t attack unless they feel threatened. You’ll notice that after spotting them, I never make direct eye contact, even though I keep track of their position. They were displaying curious body language, not aggression. I wish I could’ve been a little more cautious, but realistically, if they *had* decided to attack…”

Well. There wouldn’t have been a whole lot he could do about it.

“Did you name them?!” Yuzuriha suddenly asked, her voice bright with curiosity and just a little too excited.

Senku blinked at her. He was glad to hear that tone again— lighter, more like *her* . He only wished it wouldn’t vanish again the second this flashback ended. Hopefully the next scene skipped straight to his revival, sparing everyone yet another glimpse of his body on the forest floor. His friends had seen more than enough of that.

“Of course not,” Senku replied flatly.

Though, if he *had* … he definitely wouldn’t be admitting it now. Or ever.

Still no flame.

Humidity this time of year… figures. He let out a breath. This body might’ve been physically rejuvenated, but that didn’t change physics. He wasn’t moving fast enough to hit the ignition point. He should’ve done the math to begin with.

Fine.

If brute force failed, then—as always—he’d rely on science. He could feel his grin stretching even farther at the thought.

“You didn’t already know how to do that?” Chrome asked, cheeks puffed like he was holding back laughter.

Senku narrowed his eyes at his mentee. “Life wasn’t like it is for the villagers. I didn’t *need* to know how to make fire by hand. Even when I *did* make fires, it was always with matches —or on rare occasions, solar ignition.” He smirked a little. “Besides, Chrome, science is more fun this way. The not knowing part makes it ten billion times more exciting."

He watched as that familiar spark of curiosity reignited in Chrome’s eyes, burning bright as ever. Nothing lit him up like good, hands- on science.

Off to the side, Kohaku rolled her eyes again— but not before he caught the fondness tucked behind the gesture.

> He went out to a small source of ground water nearby. Gathering up some rocks and bundling them into his arms. Heh.... His hair really had split into two parts. He could fix it but... It kinda looked better this way with the new cracks - And weren't those interesting, he had theories he wanted to work on, but that would have to wait until he had secured the essentials.
>
> Improvisation that was how civilization advances.

“Looks like I was right, Senku-chan~! You really *did* style your hair like that specifically because of the cracks. That’s so cute!” Gen chirped.

Senku shot him a sharp look. The thumb that had been resting casually against Gen’s wrist lifted— only to flick the exact spot it had touched, light but pointed. Gen flinched, more from the loss than the flick itself. Touchy, clearly. Worse, Senku didn’t return the contact. The warmth was gone, the pulse point empty. A punishment, maybe, for poking too hard— but *unfair* , given how thoroughly Senku had been spoiling him up until now. Gen found himself a little bereft, that brief emptiness lodging somewhere in his ribs.

Hmph. Fine.

If Senku wanted to play like that, then it was *game on* .

It was going to take a lot of time, he knew that, but still he wanted to scream in frustration whenever one of the rocks he was using crumbled to bits as he cracked them together. You would think that rock owed him just a little bit of help after having kept him unconscious for 3700 years. The monkeys watching were probably thinking that THIS was dumb too. Fine, let them. Progress was slow, but that's just what science was!

"Do you think monkeys actually think like that, Senku?" Taiju asked suddenly, leaning forward with genuine curiosity. He watched as Senku shot him that familiar exasperated look — the one that said *why are you like this* — but, just as predictably, Senku moved immediately to explain.

"Not exactly. While monkeys have a lot of cognitive capabilities— like using tools— they don't have the same capacity for abstract thought that humans do. That said, they do have remarkable memory in certain areas. For example, chimpanzees consistently outperform humans in tests of working memory—"

"Ehh?! What's the difference?" Chrome interrupted, eyes wide.

Senku looked pleased, though. He always got that way when someone asked about science, so Taiju wasn't even a little surprised.

"Working memory is like a temporary storage system in the brain," Senku explained. "They tested it by having chimps play memory games. One example: a screen shows nine squares. One fills in— you have to remember its location. If you do, it adds a second, then a third, and so on. Chimps consistently outperform humans, even at the higher levels. If you're interested in more about the differences in memory types, the Mentalist over there is probably better qualified. But for our modern folks— imagine last- minute cramming for a test. That kind of short- term retention? That's working memory."

Chrome immediately turned toward Gen.

Taiju could never really tell what Gen was thinking— he always had that unreadable calm to him— but this time, his expression scrunched slightly. Kind of like the way Senku looked when someone poked at something just a little too close to home.

“Why don’t I tell you about that later, Chrome?” Gen said, tone smooth but avoiding. “Me and Senku have a few things to take care of after this. But tomorrow, before the reaction continues, I’ll explain all the different types of memory to you properly.”

Chrome nodded eagerly, already excited.

> Study everything, try everything, the foundations of the science that pushed the world so far!
>
> It took him a solid few hours to figure out how best to shape the tools, and with that, he could move onto the next step, and the one after that. Even the most basic of tools would allow for more utility out of what he already had. For example, some plant fibers, when unraveled and twisted and braided together would create a rope, and with a rope... The leverage to create friction at a higher pace.
>
> Smoke started flooding his wood flakes and Senku took them in hand, gently blowing on them and turning the embers into that beautiful and destructive force known as fire.
>
> It was just day one, but he'd say he was making pretty decent progress.
>
> He was also really thirsty and needed some water.

"What's interesting about Senku-chan's brain is the way it adapts so quickly," Gen was saying, eyes locked on the screen like it was some fascinating live specimen. "One second, you realize you can’t do something, the next, you’ve got ten tools already mapped out to build the thing that *will* let you do it. Most people go ‘I can’t do it’ to ‘I need this tool’—they try and fail, then figure out they need *another* tool just to get *that* far. But Senku’s brain skips all that. Straight to the blueprint under the blueprint. Probably from all the insane mental roadmaps he makes.”

Senku blinked. Then turned, slowly, toward him.

...Huh.

He wasn't *saying* he was in love with him, sure, but he might as well have been. The tone, the fascination, the unfiltered praise that wasn’t even performative—just honest admiration.

Senku stared for a beat longer.

How the hell did he deny this man for so long?

Not that he was going to *say* that out loud. He just scratched at his cheek and looked back at the screen, hiding a grin that threatened to be way too self-satisfied.

...Okay. Maybe a *little* egotistical. But not *wrong*.

It didn't take long for Senku to find a rhythm.

Roughly fashioned fishing nets were dropped into the shallow stream, earning him maybe 500 calories a day—on a good day—if something small and unlucky wandered in. Traps were scattered across the forest floor once he admitted, begrudgingly, that he wasn't built for hunting. Foraging took up the rest of his time: roots, wild greens, anything remotely edible. But even with everything combined, it wasn't enough. Not really. And if this was hard in spring, it would be ten billion times worse come fall. Or winter.

Ryusui clicked his tongue. "What a shame it would be to see such a beautiful body fading away like that."

He grinned toward the *not* couple, eyes sparkling with mischief. He lived for this kind of chaos. Gen immediately flicked a glance at Senku, and the look in his eyes was downright *hungry*. Meanwhile, Senku was rolling his eyes so hard it was a miracle he didn't sprain something. Shame they didn't seem like the sharing type. Not that it would stop him from teasing. Besides, the amusement he got from watching them flail through their slow-burn nonsense was more than enough to satisfy him—for now, at least.

Senku leaned in, whispering something into Gen's ear with all the subtlety of a live wire. Gen stiffened instantly, the practiced mask of his Mentalist persona dropping hard over a blush that looked like it *hurt* to hide.

Ryusui *needed* to know what was said.

He turned immediately to Ukyo, who was already giving him a look. That tired, disappointed, you're-about-to-ask-something-stupid look.

"Come on…" Ryusui whispered.

"No," Ukyo replied flatly.

"Pleaaaase," Ryusui pressed, low and dramatic. "I *desire* to know."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"…No." Ukyo repeated, but this time it was almost a laugh. He was *cracking*. Ryusui could feel it.

Sure enough, a few seconds passed, and Ukyo gave in with a quiet sigh. "Senku leaned in and said—*quote—'do you think he would be willing to buy our sex tapes.'"*

Ryusui practically choked on air.

"ABSOLUTELY! I DESIRE THEM!" He wheezed, delighted.

Gen made a strangled noise and buried his face in his hands. The control he had over his flush was impressive, Ryusui had a feeling if he was anyone else he would be bright red right now. Senku just smirked, smug as hell, and not at all ashamed. Though that didn't stop the flush that was going down the scientists neck, not nearly so unaffected.

It wasn’t sustainable. Not for him.

He could already feel it in his body—subtle signs of decline. His limbs were a little slower, his grip a little weaker, despite the miraculous recovery gifted by the petrification. Honestly, he’d probably be dead already if that process hadn’t jumpstarted him back into existence in near-perfect condition.

Tanning leather without modern chemicals hadn’t been particularly difficult, but the result lacked the flexibility he was used to. Still, it worked. The pieces were stiff and uneven, but it covered his skin—kept him from getting scratched up or sliced open by brambles. Yuzuriha would probably cry if she saw how crude it was: *As long as it’s functional…*

“If you’re done flirting,” Chrome muttered, arms crossed and brow furrowed, “Can you explain the tanning process with modern chemicals?”

Before Senku could even open his mouth, Yuzuriha raised a hand— bright- eyed and excited, “Is it okay if I explain this, actually?”

Chrome blinked, a little surprised. She wasn’t usually the one to jump in on the science.

Senku just snickered, clearly pleased. “Who better than our craft queen? Floor’s all yours.”

Yuzuriha smiled at the compliment before diving straight in, “So! In the Stone World, tanning starts by cleaning and scraping the hide to get rid of any leftover fats and hair. After that, you soak it— and this is where nitric acid comes in, although there are other options too... This one just seems to work the best— anyway! After the soak, you start manipulating the leather. That means you stretch it, move it around constantly to soften it up. Senku’s leather is softer now, but I bet he skipped this step the first time around, which is why he kept complaining about how stiff it was.”

Chrome already felt his brain starting to scramble. She hadn't even slowed down.

"Then comes the actual tanning," Yuzuriha continued, barely pausing. "You add the tanning agents— things like bark, roots, or specific leaves. After that, you dehydrate it, and ta- da, finished leather! Now, in modern times, it's actually really similar— except instead of bark or acid, you use things like sulfate solutions. They help stabilize the material and keep it flexible. Then you can add special oils afterward to preserve the leather and keep it shiny and smooth. So yeah! It's kind of simpler with chemicals, but if you manipulate it properly, the results are really close!"

She finally took a deep breath, practically glowing.

Chrome stared. Then glanced at Senku, who was just grinning at him.

Senku shrugged. "You wanted an explanation."

... Listening to Senku explain chemical processes at light speed was easier than *that* . His brain was going to leak out of his ears.

She looked so pleased, and Taiju looked smug like he won a lottery behind her.

And it was.

So. Food, water, shelter, fire… clothing. The survival basics were checked off. Now, it was time to move forward. To really begin.

Senku tilted his head back, staring up at the sky through the tree canopy, the corners of his lips twitching upward into something sharp and hungry.

"This is gonna be exhilarating."

Break for 16 Hours

"Okay, it's been fun, but unfortunately Senku- chan and I have a few miscellaneous things to take care of tonight," Gen announced, clapping his hands together with a light, cheerful tone.

It was still bright out— just past that golden stretch of daylight when people's guard started to dip. That perfect twilight lull, when even the most stubborn minds were slightly more relaxed, less alert. There was an old theory about it: during the day, people were sharp because they needed to be productive; at night, alert because of threats— but in the lull before dusk, the brain loosened just enough. Perfect for a mentalist. Perfect for a read.

Senku nodded silently and stood, already heading for the door. Gen took the opportunity to quickly scan the group.

Yup. They definitely thought he was making it up.

Ryusui was giving them the most smug, knowing grin imaginable—like he expected them to go off and tape themselves like Senku had teased earlier. Which, obviously, was *not* the case. (Unfortunately.) Chrome and Kohaku exchanged an exaggerated look of disbelief. They were amused, clearly, but not buying it either. Even Taiju and Yuzuriha looked unsure. And honestly, those two were never wrong about Senku's behavior. If even *they* looked confused —

"Going slow, Mentalist," Senku said, grabbing Gen's wrist and tugging him toward the door. "We have work to do."

Gen barely had time to smirk before being pulled out. Just as the door fluttered shut behind them, Ryusui's voice carried one last time:

"So do you think they're lying so they can go f—"

Snap.

The door closed, cutting it off. Unlike Ukyo, Gen didn't have super hearing, and thank *everything* for that.

Still, he didn't need superpowers to feel the heat radiating from Senku's ears. They were *definitely* red.

Gen couldn't see his face, but he didn't need to.

He knew the exact expression Senku was wearing— and it was probably the cutest one yet.

Focus, Gen reminded himself sharply.

Focus.

Gen drew in a quiet breath and sorted through the information Suika had gathered. Two older villagers had been stealing rice—one of them even tried to lie about it. They'd been punished, appropriately. But what stood out to him more was a third woman. Not directly involved, maybe, but she'd made a pointed comment about the revived getting better food. That meant rumors. Perception problems. Resentment. His job, then, was fourfold: identify the actual thief, uncover the reasoning, trace the origin of the rumor, and smooth it all over before things escalated. Easy in theory. Messier in practice. That was where he thrived.

"I think I'll just deal with Ginro tonight," Senku spoke up, casually. "I'll leave Ruri for one of the breaks. She's not the issue, I just want to understand her thinking before I make what she asked for."

That suited him fine. "Sounds good. You know where Ginro tends to be around this time?"

Senku gave him a flat look, arms crossed. "Do you think I keep you around for shits and giggles, Mentalist? You tell me."

Gen gave a faux pout, but his eyes were already half-lidded in calculation. “He’s the type to linger near the edge of the forest before going in. Stalling. Watching. He likes to think he’s mysterious, but he repeats patterns.”

That earned him an impressed glance—brief but genuine—and Gen felt something spark low in his chest. Being seen by Senku like that? Dangerous. Tempting. There was always something magnetic about getting Senku’s approval. Almost made him want to—

No. That thought was going into the mental vault for now.

“Alright, Senku-chan~! I’ll meet you back in the lab after I’ve cleaned up the mess. Shouldn’t take long!”

And with that, Gen turned on his heel and made his exit. He needed the distance to recalibrate. Senku’s presence had a way of messing with his rhythm.

Time to work.

Gen moved through the village with a relaxed gait, all easy smiles and loose shoulders—but his eyes were sharp, scanning. Watching. He wasn’t just looking for his targets; he was searching for the way people moved when they thought no one was watching.

Resentment had a flavor. It carried in the curl of the mouth just after a polite smile, in the tight clutch of a basket handle, in the stiffness of someone pretending to be busy. Especially when *he* walked past. As a revived, as someone associated with Senku, he made the perfect lightning rod for unspoken bitterness. If anyone believed the revived were favored, then seeing *him*—polished and unscuffed and charming—would bring that emotion to the surface.

And there it was. A glance that lingered a fraction too long. A mouth drawn just a little tight. Gen’s eyes slid past the offender smoothly, as though he hadn’t noticed at all, even as he filed the expression away in vivid detail. Hands that didn’t loosen when the speaker passed. Shoulders squared unnaturally. Eyes a little too focused on their task.

There was a woman by the drying racks who didn't even look up when he walked past, but her hands were moving with twice the force needed to tie bundles of herbs. Tension. She was angry, not at him specifically, but at what he *represented*. Interesting. Very interesting.

He'd circle back to her.

Another man by the old storage shed seemed overly interested in reorganizing rice baskets—poorly, at that. Gen let his gaze linger just long enough to read the guilt clinging to the edge of his movements. He wasn't angry. He was nervous.

Possible thief number one.

Gen hummed faintly to himself, pacing slow and aimless on the surface, while inside, the map was already taking shape. He could smell something bitter beneath the surface of this tiny society—jealousy, fear, entitlement—and now that he'd gotten the scent, it wouldn't take long to unearth the root.

He let his fingertips trail idly along a hanging rope as he passed by, a picture of calm elegance. All part of the show. He kept moving, winding casually around the more populated areas of the village, never doubling back too obviously, never letting on that he was observing. To anyone else, it would look like Gen Asagiri was on a lazy stroll with no particular destination.

But he was *watching everything*.

A man hunched low near the firewood pile tensed at his approach—not fear, but something subtler, more insidious. A pinched mouth, eyes that didn't meet his. Guilt, maybe. Shame? Not enough to convict, but enough to flag.

One.

At the water basins, a teenage girl paused her scrubbing when she noticed him. Her smile was thin and forced, chin lifted in practiced politeness. She returned to her work too quickly. Performance. There was anger in the way she wrung the cloth after he passed.

Two.

Closer to the drying racks, a younger man leaned against a post pretending to look bored, but Gen caught the twitch of his jaw as he passed. A flick of the tongue against his teeth—subtle, classic irritation. He wasn't just bitter, he was *smoldering* in his anger.

Three.

Gen filed each of them away. He didn't need names yet—just tells. Once he had enough emotional markers to triangulate, *then* he'd move in.

But it wasn't all glares and cold shoulders.

Because one person—an older woman near the tool shed—actually *smiled* when she saw him.

Gen's brows rose slightly at the genuine warmth in her eyes. She didn't wave or call out, just nodded with an open expression. No tension in her posture, no subtle shift in her stance. She was glad to see him, and not because she needed something. Interesting. A control subject, then. Someone with no apparent bitterness. Gen offered her a lazy grin in return, then watched carefully.

No change. Still warm. No guardedness, no false brightness. Whatever she'd heard, she either didn't believe it—or didn't care.

Perfect.

He needed to speak to her. Not just because she was safe, but because she would give him a read on how much of the rumor had spread... and how it was *being received* by those who didn't buy into it. If she *had* heard the whisperings, her opinion of the sources would be invaluable. One clean voice to set the baseline before he started digging into the rot.

Gen's smile sharpened just a little. Observation time was over.

Time to begin.

She was still sorting through old reed baskets near the shed, humming a faint little tune to herself, when Gen strolled up beside her with all the air of a man who had absolutely nothing better to do.

"Good afternoon, my dear Dia~" Gen greeted smoothly. "Don't tell me the village's shining beauty is reduced to basket duty?"

She snorted lightly but didn't stop working. "They don't carry themselves, you know. And it's not like my daughters ever use these properly—might as well get them cleaned out before they all rot."

Gen crouched beside her, making a show of inspecting one of the baskets with a faux-critical eye. "Hm, tragic. Still, I must say, your presence makes even withered reed look fashionable."

That got a laugh—a soft, genuine one. "You're still very good with words."

He flashed her an easy grin. "Well, some of us have to contribute with our mouths rather than our hands. Everyone plays to their strengths."

Her expression softened. Not flirtatious—Gen wasn't her type she was happily married—but still warm. She was comfortable, not wary. Good. He let the smile linger for a moment longer before casually laying the trap.

“Been busy lately?” he asked, voice dipped just enough to sound offhand.

She gave a little shrug, brushing dirt from her fingers. “Not really. There’s less for us older folks to do now that the revived ones are making most of the plans. Can’t say I mind much, though—saves my back.”

“Mmm~ but I imagine not everyone feels quite so… relieved,” He said gently, letting the sentence trail off. Leading.

Her brows lifted slightly, and for a second, he saw the faintest flicker of understanding cross her face. She wasn’t stupid, just not the ambitious sort. Pretty, social, and quietly perceptive when she wanted to be. Her lips pressed together in thought, “There’s always going to be a few that feel left behind. ome of them don’t like seeing new people with clean clothes and full bowls. Makes them wonder who gets what… and why.”

Gen tilted his head. “And what do *you* think, Dia?”

“I think the revived ones are keeping us alive,” she said simply. “They make food faster than we ever did. Things are better, even if it’s not perfect yet. But not everyone sees it that way.”

Bingo.

“So the rumors…” Gen said, watching her face carefully.

Dia shook her head. “I don’t know who started them, but I’ve heard them. Whispered. Not loud. Mostly about food. And that someone saw a sack go missing from the back storehouse. I told my girls not to listen.”

Gen offered her a grateful little nod, the sort that came with unspoken thanks for not wasting his time.

“Thank you, Dia. Always a pleasure speaking with the voice of reason.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled. “Go do your clever thing, what does your Senku call you? A Mentalist? Just don’t drag me into the middle of it.”

Your Senku?

“Perish the thought,” Gen said, already rising to his feet and brushing imaginary dust off his sleeves. “You’ll remain my confidante, untouched by scandal.”

Now he had what he needed: a baseline, confirmation of the rumor’s spread, and just enough context to shift his questions with the others.

The best way to make this work was to gather a group of five—each one a potential suspect in the eyes of the village, or at the very least adjacent enough to the situation to warrant scrutiny. Crucially, one of them needed to be innocent. Absolutely, without a doubt, not involved. Someone friendly, but a little believable. Someone who might’ve been present at the wrong time, or just close enough to the actual culprits that Gen could use them.

Because if he pretended to believe it was that one—the innocent one—it would lower the guards of the others. People loved to relax when they thought the blame had already been cast elsewhere, especially if it was on someone they knew was harmless. That’s when their expressions changed, their body language loosened just enough to tell on themselves.

The real beauty of it was that he didn’t need confessions. He just needed cues. Shifting gazes, twitching fingers, glances toward hidden places. If it came down to it, he could use their reactions like a game of hot and cold. Say something close to the truth, watch where they look. Accuse someone wrong, see who seems relieved. It wasn’t just investigation—it was performance, and Gen was very good at knowing when his audience was sweating under the lights.

He smiled to himself, already forming the cast list in his head. Five players, one innocent. The rest? He'd read them like a script.

Let the show begin.

Gen moved through the village with an easy smile, but behind his eyes, calculation ticked away like clockwork. The recent food issue wasn't just a simple case of hunger—it had layers. Motivations, tensions, rumor. He needed clarity. And the best way to get it? Pressure. In a controlled setting.

With a practiced air of casual friendliness, Gen began inviting a few specific villagers to gather. Each one selected with intention.

"Sho~," He called first, spotting the broad-shouldered fisherman rinsing his nets. "I need a few sharp minds for a little puzzle. Your experience feeding the town might be just what I need."

Sho grinned, pleased to be called sharp, and agreed without hesitation. A few good compliment could always get you a good result. Next was Unmo, who was already tapping his hands rhythmically against an overturned crate. "Unmo! You're always in the know at celebrations—I'm sure you've heard *all* sorts of things." Unmo nodded brightly, clearly just happy to be included.

Then came En, who smiled warmly at him from near the clay ovens. "Ah, En-san~ a clever cook like you surely notices tons of things! I'd love your insight."

She preened at the flattery and followed with a bounce in her step. Argo, meanwhile, was harder to read—but his serious nature and warrior's discipline made him invaluable. "Argo," Gen said carefully, tone a little firmer. "You're someone people don't want to cross. Perfect to help me spot who *might* have crossed the line."

Finally—Natri. The wise older man was seated near the communal fire pit, his eyes thoughtful as always. Gen approached him last, quieting his tone slightly. “Natri-san, I’ve heard you’ve been a little troubled lately. If you have a few minutes, I’d like your help sorting something out. I trust your judgment.”

Natri looked at him with narrowed eyes for a long moment before giving a slow nod.

With all five gathered, Gen clapped his hands together. “Now then! I’ve got a little mystery that needs solving—and who better to help than a group as observant and experienced as this?”

As they settled into place, Gen stood just off-center, eyes flicking subtly from face to face. They didn’t know it yet, but he’d already chosen his *target.* Poor Natri would have to endure a false accusation. It was risky, but necessary. If the others believed Gen’s suspicions were genuine, they'd let things slip. Resentment. Guilt. Relief. He wouldn't need to keep up the act for long or be overly blatant, but it would probably still hurt a little. With that in mind, he wouldn't waste the opportunity, if he was going to falsely accuse someone, then he needed to get the results that made it worth it. He would watch every twitch of the fingers. Every shift of the feet. The village would be better for this. Natri would understand—eventually.

Gen kept his posture loose, voice light, almost singsong as he strolled a slow circle around the group, arms folded behind his back like he was about to lead them through a fun little party game.

“Alright, everyone~” Gen began, flashing a smile wide enough to mask the razor’s edge beneath it. “You’re probably wondering why I’ve gathered such a charming and trustworthy group of villagers together, yes?”

En giggled behind her hand. Sho puffed up slightly. Unmo looked delighted. Argo simply nodded once. Natri, as Gen expected, remained impassive—watching. Good. The baseline was set.

“Well, here’s the thing. Some food’s gone missing again,” His tone didn’t shift, not yet. “Now, most people are whispering that it was rice—but I have it on *very* good authority,” Gen added, pausing for effect, “That it was actually *wheat* that was taken.”

He let that sink in. There was a tiny flicker across Sho's face—barely noticeable. A downward twitch of the mouth before he caught himself. Argo's brow furrowed a hair deeper, but his posture didn't change. En blinked and tilted her head in that vaguely performative confusion Gen had seen from her before. Unmo... scratched his head and muttered something about "I thought it was rice?"

Gen didn't miss it. One person trying too hard not to react. One person *just* correcting him. Another trying to play dumb, maybe. Honestly all four of them truly needed to be talked to, but only one of them was the one spreading rumors, that was the most important. Even the ones that stole, that wasn't anywhere near as important as finding the ones making the rumors. If it was, he would have just asked Kinro for who they were. No, this works better, an unbiased read into the situation where he didn't know who the ones who stole were, gave him more flexibility.

"But I'm not here to accuse anyone," He said, still smiling. "No, no. That's not my style. I just want to understand what happened. Because if people are stealing wheat from our stores… well, that says something about how desperate things are getting, doesn't it?"

He stopped in front of Natri—let the quiet build—then turned away just as quickly, redirecting the tension. "Of course, some folks are saying it's only the revived people who get the *good* food. That's an interesting theory too, don't you think? Makes you wonder what people have been whispering about *me*, hmm?"

Another sweep of the eyes. He was already calculating who looked guilty, who looked scared, and who—most importantly—looked *surprised*.

Natri didn't bristle—he was far too composed for that. But he did step forward with quiet dignity, his hands folding behind his back like the village elder he was.

"I understand your concern, Asagiri," Natri said calmly, "But Kinro has already dealt with the ones responsible. They were caught. Punished. I assure you, if you've gathered us to relitigate—"

“Shhh.” Gen pressed a finger to his lips, dragging the sound out playfully, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. He turned his full attention onto Natri, watching closely—not for guilt, but for how the others *reacted* to seeing the village's calmest voice get cut off.

“You’re jumping the gun a little, Natri-san,” He crooned. “Don’t worry. I’m not accusing you of anything serious. If you *were* involved—hypothetically—I doubt it was even your idea. You’re much too respected for that. But that’s the thing, isn’t it? People like you don’t *need* to be the thief. You just have to look the other way when someone else is.”

A lie, of course. Gen had no intention of implicating Natri. But the tension it sparked was worth its weight in gold.

Sho shifted his stance.

Unmo’s jovial expression faltered slightly, teeth grinding at the inside of his cheek.

En’s smile sharpened for the briefest second.

Argo crossed his arms tightly.

There it was. A pulse. A rhythm of discomfort radiating from the group the second Natri became the center of the narrative. Gen leaned back, giving Natri a respectful incline of the head. “You see, I’m not really interested in punishing anyone. But if something’s being hidden… if there’s a rumor, or an idea, or *resentment* festering somewhere in our little paradise—I want to pluck it out at the root before it poisons the well.”

He clapped his hands together. “So! Who wants to be a good neighbor and help me get to the bottom of things~?”

The silence that followed wasn’t quite silence. Tension pure and simple. Proof was always in the pudding. People who stole once usually didn’t stop at one crime—and Gen was certain that the two Kinro had already handled were the easiest to catch, the loudest players in the

game. But the source of the rumors? The one quietly sowing resentment? *That* person would still have something to hide. Likely already having obtained some ill gotten goods. Probably something *tangible*—a bag tucked into a shed corner, hidden among the dried herbs, or shoved beneath loose floorboards.

All he had to do was let them show him.

"Alright, everyone," Gen announced with a clap, tone bright and theatrical. "As your local mentalist and humble investigator, I have a secret method—divined from the spirits themselves, obviously—that's going to help me uncover the rest of the stolen goods."

That earned some exchanged glances. Argo squinted. En looked amused. Sho furrowed his brow just slightly.

"I'm going to *channel* the group energy," Gen continued smoothly. "You five are going to walk with me around the village. We'll follow the spiritual flow—" he threw in some vague, wiggly hand gestures for flair, "—and somewhere along the way, the magic will *guide* me right to the leftovers."

Natri frowned faintly but said nothing. Good man he really caught on quick.

"It'll be just like a little game of hot and cold," Gen added breezily. "So don't worry—no one's in trouble *yet.*"

He turned and began strolling slowly through the village, deliberately vague in his direction. His sharp eyes stayed off the path ahead and instead flicked between the faces of the group behind him. A twitch of the eye from En when they turned toward the tool shed. Sho scratched his arm when Gen meandered past the granary. Unmo's cheerful grin stayed fixed, but his steps *slowed* when they passed the edge of the drying racks.

And there—Argo.

Gen changed course abruptly toward the row of smokehouses, and Argo's shoulders tightened ever so slightly. His steps grew stiff, mechanical. Like he was trying *very hard* not to be seen redirecting his attention. That was good. That meant this was somewhere he *didn't* want Gen to go.

Gen pivoted on a heel. "Actually—let's head this way instead." He gestured toward a cluster of storage sheds near the back of the village. "The spirits are definitely giving me a tingle in this direction."

Argo didn't react.

Which told Gen *everything*.

Because the moment he changed direction *away* from Argo's unease, the others loosened. Unmo laughed. En's posture evened out. Sho began humming under his breath. Argo, meanwhile, looked straight ahead—but his jaw had clenched.

Bingo.

Found you.

And now all he had to do was walk just far enough away, then circle back—like the spirits had *changed their mind.*

"Hmm…" Gen let out a thoughtful hum, slowing his steps as they reached a small clearing near the outer edge of the village. "No, no… this isn't quite right after all."

He turned slowly, letting the full dramatic weight of his pause settle over the group.

"The aura's changed direction. The energy's… shifting." He widened his eyes just slightly, enough to look theatrically spooked. "It wants us to backtrack. Somewhere closer. Closer

to…” He let the sentence trail off, then whipped around toward the smokehouses. Argo didn’t flinch. That was *almost* impressive. But Gen was already watching the way the man’s hands curled into fists at his sides, the slight bracing of his stance—as if preparing to hold his ground.

Too late, darling.

“The spirits are practically yelling at me,” Gen announced, tone bright and teasing. “They’re saying: ‘Gen-chan, you silly goose, the answer was right behind you all along!’”

Unmo gave a confused little chuckle. Sho’s expression soured. En looked skeptical, lips pursed. And Natri—sweet Natri—just sighed and rubbed his temple like he was trying to summon the patience of the gods. But now, Argo had his full attention. He was watching the rigid way he walked now. Not too fast. Not too slow. Like someone trying *very hard* not to draw attention. Clearly, the man had no idea who he was up against, or he wouldn't have even bothered with this weak act and would have just given in.

“Let’s see now…” Gen led them straight toward the smokehouse door, exaggeratedly wrinkling his nose. “Smells like woodsmoke and guilt~”

He cast one last glance over his shoulder, just in time to catch the micro-expression he’d been waiting for—Argo’s eyes darting, just a little too quick, to the far side of the building.

And there it is.

He kept his face bright, casual, unfazed. “Just going to peek around back real quick. The spirits are giving me really strong vibes about this."

When he turned the corner, his gut already knew what he’d find. Sure enough—nestled behind a broken plank of the storage bin was a rough canvas sack, tied tight, the bottom edges crusted in dry grain. Gen knelt down and tugged the knot loose, letting the scent of aging wheat spill into the air.

There it was. The real results of some heisting.

Proof.

And all it took was a little walk, a little pressure, and a whole lot of reading people like open books. He stood up, brushing off his hands and walking back around the corner with his most dazzling grin.

“Well, well, well,” He sang sweetly. “Looks like the spirits were right again.”

He tossed the sack forward, letting it land with a satisfying *thump* at the group’s feet.

“Anyone care to guess where I found this?”

Gen let the silence hang. The others watched, caught somewhere between confusion and dawning clarity. The air was taut, fragile.

Argo’s jaw clenched.

Gen smiled.

“There it is~” He said gently, like he’d just stumbled across a misplaced tool rather than a lie that had nearly fractured the village. “That ugly expression, right on schedule. What is it you're feeling right now, guilt, perhaps?”

Argo’s glare was sharp, but Gen didn’t flinch. He stepped forward, voice dropping to something lower. Warmer. Just for Argo. “You know you were wrong, don’t you? Not just stealing—twisting the truth. Making people think the revived were eating better. That they’d never understand your struggles. Even though we’re all struggling together. You told people that they weren’t part of the same fight.”

“I didn’t—” Argo started, but Gen lifted a finger.

“Ah ah. You did. You *know* you did. And the worst part?” He looked around, catching each pair of eyes in turn. “You made them believe it. You made people afraid of each other. Distrustful. That’s a poison. One that spreads. Surely you didn't think that Senku-chan would let that go? That he wouldn't realize and send me out to figure you out?"

It never hurt to build up Senku's image a little more.

Argo looked away. Gen didn’t let up.

“You’re strong. Respected. People *listen* to you. So I want you to use that.” His smile sharpened. “Because if you can convince them of a lie, you can convince them of the truth. That we are one village. That the science users and the stone world survivors are part of the same damn team. That we rise together or fall alone.”

“And if I don’t?” Argo asked flatly, but his voice had lost all bite.

“Then I let the Kingdom of Science Generals decide what to do with you. And trust me, Senku’s justice is far more terrifying than mine. I’m the nice one.” Gen’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “You’d rather play messenger than martyr.”

Natri crossed his arms looking very disappointed. Sho looked quietly furious. En looked stunned. Unmo just looked sad.

Argo exhaled hard through his nose and nodded once, tightly. “Fine. I’ll fix it.”

“Louder,” Gen said, stepping back so the group could hear.

Argo turned toward them, voice low but steady. “I was wrong. I spread lies. I let my bitterness get the better of me. I’ll make it right.”

Gen nodded, satisfied. “See? That wasn’t so hard. Now let’s walk you back through the village and start planting some *truth* this time.”

Once Argo had disappeared around the bend with Unmo at his side—no doubt already spinning a revised tale to undo the old damage—Gen let the rest of the group disperse. He offered soft reassurances and his usual calming smile, gave En a gentle touch on the elbow to guide her back toward the others, and waved Sho off with a joke about owing him a better fishing pole someday and how he would gave Senku cook something up for him.

But he didn’t move to leave himself. Not yet.

Natri lingered in place, calm but unreadable as ever, arms behind his back like he was thinking through several things at once. Gen stepped up beside him and—just for once—let the showmanship fall away.

“…You were never a suspect,” Gen said quietly. “Not for a second.”

Natri didn’t react at first. Then: “I figured as much. You’re not careless with your choices, Asagiri.”

Gen dipped his head in a small, respectful bow. “Still, it couldn’t have felt good, being accused in front of your peers. Especially with that performance.”

“You needed someone they’d trust to fall for it,” Natri said, tone neutral. “Someone whose guilt would force the others to stop acting calm.”

Gen blinked. Then huffed out a soft, genuine laugh. “Ten billion percent correct. But still—I owe you an apology. It was a low move, using your reputation that way. So thank you. For letting it happen.”

Natri finally turned to face him, expression lightening. “It was a good play. Taught them something without raising a weapon. That’s worth the sting of being your scapegoat.”

“You’d make a scary Mentalist,” Gen teased with a grin. “Don’t steal my job.”

Natri let out a quiet chuckle—just once—and gave Gen a single pat on the shoulder.

“Continue to do right by them, Asagiri. That’s all I ask. All I've ever asked of you boys.”

Gen watched him walk off, posture straight, head high.

“I plan to,” He murmured. Then, with a dramatic sigh and a little flair of his coat, Gen turned back toward the lab. Time to report to Senku—and, more importantly, demand praise for solving an entire social crisis before dinner.

Senku approached the edge of the forest with practiced calm, the branches shifting slightly overhead in the warm evening breeze. The sun had dipped low enough to bathe everything in amber, and shadows were stretching long across the ground.

He wasn’t in a rush.

Ginro’s patterns were nothing if not predictable—sneaking out once a day, always around the same time, always glancing over his shoulder like someone *definitely* hiding something. And Senku, unfortunately for him, had Gen's advice on where he would be, and the Mentalist would never be wrong about something like that. Plus, even as someone who was unexperienced with following people into the forest, Ginro made it far too careful. If Senku had been a hunter he would have been half tempted to scold his prey for being so obvious.

Ginro.

And—yep. He was talking to himself. What a Ginro thing to be doing.

Senku immediately dropped low, crouching behind a low cluster of brush, eyes narrowed as he watched Ginro pace back and forth with dramatic hand gestures.

He couldn’t hear what he was saying from this distance, but whatever it was, Ginro was animated about it. Senku spotted something tucked under his arm—looked like a makeshift notebook of some kind, or maybe paper scraps bundled together. There were scribbles. Most of the villagers didn't actually know how to read and write yet, even though schooling had opened in part, Ginro certainly hadn't been part of those classes.

Senku tilted his head slightly.

Interesting.

Rather than confronting him, Senku inched back behind a thicker tree trunk. Ginro wasn’t exactly stealthy, but whatever this was… it didn’t seem like masturbating in the forest or anything woman related yet, which had been his top two guesses. Maybe he should have just let Kohaku handle this. He was here now, however, so might as well gather more relevant data.

And if Ginro *was* doing something monumentally stupid?

Well, catching him red-handed would make it all the more satisfying.

Senku barely shifted his weight as he leaned against the trunk of the tree. The rustle of leaves above masked most light noise, and thankfully, Ginro had the spatial awareness of a damp rock. He was still pacing in his little clearing, totally unaware of his audience. He actually came closer, making it easier for Senku to hear what he was saying.

“Okay,” Ginro muttered to himself, clutching the notebook tighter to his chest. “Okay, okay, you got this. You’re not just some handsome guard with flawless hair and dreamy eyes—you’re *smart* now. *Brainy.* Like Senku.”

Senku’s eyebrows lifted. His eye twitched and his mouth formed the word 'what' before he could stop himself.

Ginro stopped pacing and struck a pose—fist planted on his hip, chin lifted slightly, as if he were trying to mimic Senku’s trademark confidence. It was deeply uncomfortable. To see, and honestly even though Senku wasn't exactly an unbiased judge, didn't really seem all that much like him.

“‘The application of science will level the playing field,’” Ginro said aloud, voice pitched lower in what was apparently his ‘Senku impression.’ “‘Even the most average idiot can become useful with enough basic chemistry!’”

Senku blinked slowly. *I never said that, but he's not entirely wrong.*

Ginro slumped back down and buried his face in his hands. “Ughhh, this is hopeless! Why would she even *look* at me if she’s into guys like *him*? Tall, smart, science-y, weirdly hot in that 'my brain is enormous and I don't sleep' kind of way—”

Senku’s eyes widened slightly, then narrowed. Was this *seriously* what Ginro was sneaking off for? Senku had guessed that it was related to females but it was still rather annoying to have it confirmed.

“I’m *trying* to learn chemistry,” Ginro whined to himself. “I stole one of those stupid recipe things Senku left in the lab but I don't understand a thing on it! We don't know how to read in the village! What else do you want from me, universe?! I’m practically a scientist already! I said the word ‘molecule’ to someone yesterday!”

Senku slowly slid a hand down his face. Should he stop it? But at the same time, the more he learned the better, and the more that he heard, the more he could relay back to the Mentalist and have a laugh about it.

Ginro straightened up again, more determined this time. “Okay. No more doubts. You’re doing this for *love.* You’re gonna impress her. You’re gonna whip up some science and she’s gonna look at you and go ‘Wow, Ginro, I had no idea you were so intelligent and well-rounded and emotionally unavailable—’”

Senku’s brain was short-circuiting. Who the hell was ‘she’? Who exactly had developed a *Senku type*, and why was Ginro trying to *become it*? Also, that emotionally unavailable comment was... Well, it was accurate for just about anyone other than his friends and Gen, especially Gen, and why exactly was he wasting so much time when he could be going back to Gen? Clearly Ginro had some things to work out that were none of Senku's business, although that notebook being his chemistry notes DID need to be recovered.

This was deeply, profoundly stupid.

But at the same time… Senku was also kind of impressed by how committed Ginro was. It didn’t change the fact that he was a moron, but still.

Senku leaned back slightly, arms crossed over his chest as he kept listening. No way he was leaving without his notebook so he might as well hear more of whatever this moron was doing to replicate Senku's persona.

Ten billion percent worth the time.

Ginro had launched into another self-pep talk by the time Senku finished calculating the average number of neurons this man probably had access to on a good day.

“She was just… *so smart,* you know?” Ginro said, clutching his own cheeks and spinning in a slow, dramatic circle. “And the way she *talked,* like every word had a double meaning or something? Gave me chills. I didn’t even *understand* half of what she said but it sounded really cool.”

Senku narrowed his eyes. That was… oddly specific and oddly familiar.

"And those eyes," Ginro sighed, starry-eyed now as he flopped dramatically onto the nearest rock like a maiden in a tragic novel. "Like she could see right through me. Like she *knew* all my secrets, and wasn't even judging me for them. She just *smiled* like she already had the solution to my whole life figured out."

Senku's stomach twisted with a strange sort of preemptive dread. Very waxing poetic of Ginro, on point for him, but the person he was describing...

"Long sleeves," Ginro continued, dreamy. "Mystery aura. That perfect little beauty mark. Like someone pulled her straight out of a fantasy novel! And she said I looked *charming!*"

Senku's breath caught.

No.

No. There's no *way.*

"When I met her on recon," Ginro murmured, almost bashful now. "Couple weeks ago, outside the wheat fields—Senku had sent her to ask around. Said she was part of the, um, 'diplomatic branch' or whatever."

Senku's entire brain stalled out. He could feel every blood cell in his body trying to escape his skin.

No. Absolutely not.

But the sleeves. The tone. The timing of the meeting.

Oh god.

Oh no.

“Oh *hell* no,” Senku muttered.

Because there was *exactly one person* who had gone on that recon mission in disguise.

And that person had *definitely* worn a dress. Worn it *well,* even. *Too* well. And Senku, like a goddamn idiot, had *let it happen.* And now Ginro was practically creating haiku's for Senku's not quite lover but definitely life partner. Ginro’s mystery girl wasn’t some village maiden. It wasn’t even some obscure city survivor.

It was Gen.

Gen, in full Mentalist mode, dressed to the nines and dripping with false charm and coy looks, *flirting* with Ginro as a complete tactical distraction. Senku remembered Gen talking to him about it after the fact, giggling in that psychotic way that he sometimes did, and admittedly thinking back on it now with full understanding of his emotions, that had been rather attractive of him.

Senku slapped a hand to his face, groaning into it.

Gen was going to *lose it* when he heard about this.

He was never going to let Senku live this down.

And worse—*so much worse*—Ginro was apparently so smitten that he’d launched a full-blown transformation arc over it.

He was trying to become *smart.*

Because he had a *crush* on Gen.

In a *dress.*

Senku was going to have to tell Gen. It was practically a moral obligation. And also a tactical necessity, because Gen was absolutely going to weaponize this immediately. Still hiding behind the foliage, Senku watched as Ginro pulled a crumpled scrap of paper out of his pocket and started whispering what *sounded* like a chemistry recipe to himself, complete with dramatic pauses and shoulder winks.

Senku buried his face in his hands again.

It was too early in the damn night for this.

Senku stared blankly at the clearing where Ginro had just begun practicing what could only be described as a hybrid of his own speech patterns, Gen's flirty cadence, and a peacock with a head injury. The man was now attempting to hold a beaker he'd definitely stolen from the lab while pretending to swirl it like some kind of potion.

"Okay, Senku-voice," Ginro whispered to himself. "Lower. Breathe through the nose. Talk about… atoms. Real cool-like."

Senku inhaled sharply through his nose and immediately regretted the choice.

How exactly was one supposed to handle a situation like this?

It wasn't jealousy. Obviously. There was *zero* chance Ginro could ever win Gen over—not like this. Not with his half-memorized science buzzwords and painfully butchered impersonations. Gen might flirt with a brick wall if it gave him the right expression, but he'd never fall for it. That already belonged to Senku in all ways that mattered.

…Right?

Senku rubbed his temples.

Okay, even if there *was* a 0.0001% chance that Gen, for whatever reason, was charmed by a man who once called ammonium nitrate "magic dirt salt," that still wasn't the problem.

The problem was *Ginro.*

Poor, misguided, very blonde Ginro.

Because if this thing went on too long, it wasn't just going to be awkward—it was going to be *devastating.* Ginro was many things, but emotionally resilient wasn't one of them. The guy once cried because he lost his shiny spear. What was he going to do when he found out his "mystery girl" was actually *Gen in drag,* charming him out of information as part of a low-stakes espionage gig?

Senku exhaled, long and slow.

It would be kinder to cut this off at the source. Mercy, really. Strategic mercy.

He was just… preserving Ginro's dignity. Saving the village from a full-on identity crisis. Making sure Gen didn't weaponize this so effectively that he'd never be able to look the man in the eye again.

Yes. All logical, scientific reasons.

Senku adjusted his coat, stepped silently away from the bushes, and began formulating a plan. He'd help Ginro figure out the truth—gently. Subtly. Break the illusion. Remind him that *some mysteries are best left unsolved,* especially if they involve dangerously flirtatious Mentalists in disguises.

Ginro yelped and spun around like he'd been caught stealing from the kitchen—which, to be fair, wasn't far from what he was doing to Senku's persona.

"Senku?! W-What are you doing here!?"

Senku crossed his arms, deadpan. "We all live around here, dumbass. What *are you* doing out in the woods, giving science pickup lines to tree frogs?"

Ginro flushed. "I wasn't—I mean—technically I was just practicing—"

"Practicing sounding like *me*," Senku finished flatly. "And doing a shit job of it."

Ginro winced. "Okay, rude—"

"You sound like you hit your head and woke up believing 'quantum' is a flirting strategy," Senku continued, fully done pretending to be gentle. "Science isn't going to save you from your lack of game. Especially when you're quoting it wrong. Any modern person would be able to pick up on that, by the way."

"I—! That's harsh, Senku!"

He had intended to come in a little more softly... Oh well, too late now.

“Accurate though.” Senku tilted his head, analyzing Ginro like he was a slightly malformed lab rat. “You’re not smart, charming, or convincing enough to pass for me, and even if you were, copying someone else isn’t going to make your mystery girl like *you.*”

Ginro blinked, momentarily stunned by the honesty. Senku exhaled, trying again, *just slightly* softer. “Look. You want someone to like you? Don’t fake it with badly plagiarized chemistry metaphors. Find someone who’s into... I don’t know. Shiny, loud, slightly pathetic types. There are tons of people who are. I mean just look at Ryusui, that guy wants everything.”

“HEY!”

“See?” Senku raised an eyebrow. “That reaction? That’s who you are. Own that. Work with it. You’ll get further than pretending to be someone you don’t understand.”

Was that too much? Not enough?

Ginro deflated, rubbing the back of his neck. “So... you think I don’t have a chance?”

“Not if you keep acting like this.” Senku shrugged. But, yeah, since it was Gen, not ever, but Senku had probably been harsh enough already, “But maybe—*maybe*—if you stop trying to be me and start figuring out what makes *you* worth liking, your odds improve.”

It was, in Senku’s opinion, a very generous analysis.

Ginro stared at him.

Then: “You’re the worst wingman ever.”

By the time Senku made it back to the ship, the sun had dipped low enough to brush orange streaks across the clouds. Good. That meant the day was almost done and he could finally regroup—ideally with a little less dumbassery than what he'd just witnessed.

Honestly, *Ginro*?

Senku rubbed at the bridge of his nose. He wasn't emotionally constipated enough to feel *jealous,* exactly, but the fact that Ginro had managed to fall in love with a hallucination of *Gen in drag* and somehow decided the best course of action was to become a half-baked, science-butchering knockoff of Senku himself?

It was absurd. Objectively hilarious. Mildly disturbing. He wondered what made Ginro think that drag-Gen had even been interested in Senku in the first place... Actually, it wasn't out of plaec for Gen to just say something like that for no reason, even if they weren't together yet, or, they still weren't together, but... Senku reached up and tugged lightly at one of the bunches of his hair that flowed from his forehead. A grounding feeling, not one that he used very often.

Delivering this report with a straight face was going to be quite difficult.

He reached the lab steps, ducked inside, and didn't even bother to announce himself. Gen was already there—of course he was—perched on the high stool near the table, leafing through one of their newer notebooks with a contemplative expression. The lamplight hit the edges of his cheekbones just right, which was unfair and also irritating.

"You look way too peaceful," Senku said as he shut the door behind him. "Time to ruin that."

Gen looked up immediately, alert. "Oho~ I take it your Ginro safari yielded something entertaining?"

Senku raised an eyebrow and strolled over. Trying to play at it being a little more amusing for him that it actually was. Senku had no doubt that in a week or so it WOULD be more amusing than mildly disturbing, but for now it was stuck in the middle, "How do you feel about the concept of identity theft?"

Gen blinked. "...Pardon?"

“I found him giving himself a monologue about how to win over a mysterious girl,” Senku drawled, plopping down across from him. “Which would be fine, except he was trying to win her over by pretending to be *me.* Very badly.”

Gen snorted a laugh immediately, “That is both horrifying and delightful.”

“Wait for it,” Senku said, leaning forward. “Wanna know who the girl is?”

Gen narrowed his eyes. “...Senku.”

“You.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Gen’s entire posture froze. “You mean—when I dressed up as part of that reconnaissance a few weeks back—”

“Yeah. He fell for that,” Senku said, completely deadpan. “Told a tree that your eyes were like polished gems and your voice made his soul vibrate.”

Not actually what he said, but that encapsulated it pretty well.

Gen made a strangled sound and buried his face in both hands. “No. No, I don’t accept this reality.”

Senku smirked and slouched back in his chair. “Too late. You’ve got a fanboy now.”

“Why,” Gen groaned, “is your solution to every emotional inconvenience *brutal honesty?* As though you ALSO don't have a fanboy literally attempting to be you in order to win ME over?”

Yeah... It was kind of awkward. Also weirdly flattering?

They took a breath and calmed down. With the chaos wrapped and the day's workload officially checked off, Senku found himself leaning a little more heavily against the edge of the lab bench. No more villagers to manipulate. No more thieving idiots to chase down. Just the two of them, finally, and a rare silence settling over the ship's main lab area.

Senku glanced sideways at Gen, watching the way the other man casually flipped through one of the scribbled science logs. They were done. They had earned this.

And, well. The game *had* been sitting untouched for at least a few hours.

"So," Senku drawled, dragging the word out just enough to make it obvious he was up to something, "You wanna kiss me yet?"

Gen didn't even flinch. He closed the notebook with a neat little snap and gave Senku a smile that was all sweetness and teeth.

"Absolutely," he said, voice light, "But I won't, because I'm not gonna lose."

Senku blinked. "Seriously? Why not just give in?"

"Mhm~" Gen said, strolling closer, far too calm for a man who had just admitted *yes* and *no* in the same breath. "I fully intend to win, which means I'm not the one breaking first. Besides, you could always just give in, Senku-chan~! If you want it so bad that you're going to keep asking about it~"

Senku watched him for a second, head tilted like he was studying a particularly smug experiment. Which, frankly, Gen was. All carefully layered expressions and practiced charm

—dangerous to most people. But not to Senku. He had data. He had patterns. And he had a new hypothesis to test.

"Alright," Senku said, voice deceptively casual as he stepped forward. "Since you've already admitted you want to kiss me, guess I should start building the conditions where you'd *have* to."

Gen gave a low hum, amused. "Going to seduce me with math and stubbornness, are we?"

"No," Senku replied, tone dry. "I'm just going to win."

Before Gen could reply, Senku leaned in—slowly. Not all the way. Not even close enough to touch. Just enough that the air shifted between them. Enough that Gen would *have* to notice how close they were standing now, how deliberate it was. Senku's hands stayed behind his back, completely relaxed, like he wasn't doing anything suspicious at all. Then, just above a whisper: "If you really want to win this game, Mentalist, you better start preparing your countermeasures. Because I'm about to give you a lot of reasons to lose."

Gen blinked once.

The corner of Senku's mouth curled up, slow and sharp. Not a smile. A challenge. He tilted his head, lowering his voice again, like it was a secret only for Gen to hear.

"Starting with this."

Then he leaned forward—not to kiss him. Not even to touch. Just to brush his lips barely beside Gen's cheek, ghosting close to the corner of his mouth without contact. *Almost*—but not quite. The air there crackled for a half-second. Senku lingered, letting the silence stretch, before leaning back like nothing had happened.

Gen's expression had faltered. Slightly.

His pupils had dilated.

His breath had *hitched.*

Senku grinned, victorious. “Guess we’ll see how long you last.”

SLAM.

The door burst open.

“Senku! Gen! I’m here for the report!”

Both men jolted like they’d been caught making out in a broom closet.

Suika stood beaming in the doorway, her watermelon helmet slightly askew and her cheeks puffed with pride. “I came as fast as I could!"

Gen turned very slowly, still half in Senku’s personal space, hand hovering in the air like he was caught mid-seduction—which, to be fair, they both kind of had been.

“Oh no,” he whispered, mostly to himself.

Senku was already dragging a hand down his face with a groan so loud it could’ve been measured on a seismograph. “We *forgot again.*”

Suika blinked at them. “Forgot what?”

Gen, ever the professional, immediately straightened his collar and offered the girl a sparkling, rehearsed smile. “Forgot that we *absolutely* promised to listen to every word of your brilliant report tonight, dear Suika-chan~”

Suika beamed. “Yay!”

Senku turned to him, eyes flat. “You’re such a liar.”

“Mmhm. Perhaps we should have her make the report once a week though, or maybe every other day...”

Senku’s face lit *right back up*. Definitely hadn't missed the implications there.

Gen bit the inside of his cheek to stop from grinning harder.

Chapter End Notes

Attempts at detective mentalism as brought to you by rewaching 'The Mentalist'.

In my discord we've talked a few times about the different timelines and how time travel worked in this fic and I have two pictures for you. One includes the dates etc, the other just includes the theory of how time travel works in this verse. (Thank you to my wonderful discord mode for making one of them!)

Timeline of Major Events:
https://media.discordapp.net/attachments/1362831356488581320/1373372306331795637/Unchanged_timeline_20250517_195009_0000.png?ex=682c2661&is=682ad4e1&hm=6046f17e8793587a153cf7dc69ef16e207a546538bce056cb9acb7b78e5ddacf&=&format=webp&quality=lossless&width=916&height=1296

My Explination of KOS React Timeline and time travel:
https://media.discordapp.net/attachments/1362831356488581320/1373300816089186344/image.png?

ex=682c8c8d&is=682b3b0d&hm=a182b59bf303a393640b9af694c3abe0984374ebf4a6b227eeb3f34da5d1c498&=&format=webp&quality=lossless&width=1780&height=1088

End Notes

I leave this fic with this note, I am sorry that I couldn't see this fic through completely. I do adore it, but something about seeing Dr. Stone under my name is like, annoying me in a weird way and I can't put a finger on why but I'm just orphaning the works. I put a lot of consideration toward whether or not I would orphan or just delete the work, but decided to leave it up. I am REALLY sorry. Please know that I really appreciated all the support throughout the fic, and I'm really sorry about whatever my current issue is.

In regards to potentially questions:
-- You can, if you want, use my episode translations for your own works.
-- If I ever do come back, I will start from the top releasing chapters again and going over and changing anything that annoys me. (I don't see this happening but you never know)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!